

READING THE METRO:
SOCIALIST REALISM AND SVERDLOV SQUARE STATION, 1938

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ABSTRACT

Constructed in successive stages beginning in 1935, the Moscow metro was designed to be the foremost transportation system in Stalinist Moscow as well as a symbol of socialist might and a metonym for the future socialist society. Soviet officials heralded the metro as an underground palace promoting the values of socialism, and the artwork therein was meant to reflect these values. When Sverdlov Square station opened in 1938, it was decorated with bas-sculptures in the newly sanctioned socialist realist style; the artist, Natalia Danko, chose to depict pairs of male and female folk dancers from seven of the largest nationalities of the Soviet Union. Her sculptures celebrated an idealized view of folk culture that sought to glorify the Soviet state by reflecting ideals such as “the joy of every day life” and “the friendship of the peoples.” This thesis employs semiotics to reveal the ambiguity with which viewers may have read these signs, and to demonstrate the polyvalent nature of artistic production. Semiotic theory is useful in order to show how the official discourse of Socialist Realism could be both contested and reinforced through public art. The thesis contends that the Moscow metro, one of the superlative Soviet projects of the 1930s, can be understood as an ambiguous space where meaning was open to diverse interpretations.

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CHAPTER ONE - Introduction

Kolkhozniks (Collective farmers) from the sticks are touring Moscow. The guide is reciting standard materials about the “accomplishments of the Soviet system,” about its “concern for the human being,” about the “expanding needs of Soviet people” and the “abundance of consumer goods.”

One of the *kolkhozniks* says: “Comrade Leader, I spent the whole day yesterday walking around the city, and I didn’t see any of the things you’re talking about.” The guide replies with irritation: “You should spend less time walking around and more time reading newspapers!”¹

This anecdote from the Soviet 1930s reveals much about the era, a period in which massive gaps existed between the official proclamation that “life is getting better, comrades!” and the often arduous realities of everyday life. Had our guide been on her toes, however, she might have advised the *kolkhoznik* in search of the splendours of socialism to abandon the streets of Moscow entirely, and enter the newly forged world underground.

Built in successive stages from 1935, at the time of its inauguration the Moscow metro was one of the most tangible accomplishments of the Soviet regime. Lauded by its contemporaries as “the finest in the world,”² an “underground palace,”³ and a “school” that teaches “the power of socialism,”⁴ the metro was not merely a transportation system, but a symbol of socialist might and a metonym for the future socialist society. Invested with meaning through the architecture and works of art that decorated its interior, the metro was a testament to the modernist faith in the unlimited power of science and

¹ Quoted in Von Geldern and Stites (1995: 284).

² Shestakov (1938). See Rylkin (2003) for an analysis of the superlativeness of the discourse surrounding the metro project in the 1930s.

³ As discussed in Wolf (1994).

⁴ Joseph Stalin, “Metro Deistvie,” in *Ogonek* 17 (1935), p. 1, quoted in Gerin (2000: 13).

technology to improve society and transform humanity. In light of this, it may be fruitful to examine the images chosen to promote these state goals.

For the Soviet government, spatial and social engineering were inextricably linked: central to the creation of a modern, Soviet Person was the creation of spaces that would facilitate the transformation of uncultured masses into upstanding Soviet citizens. Katerina Clark (2003) has convincingly argued that the Stalinist attitude toward space can be understood in terms of a sacred/profane dialectic, such that the purification or repurification of space was an obsessive component of Stalinist culture.⁵ In Clark's view, spatial purification referred to the "the redirection of architecture from the variegated toward a more consistently maintained style" that was harmonious, whole, and monumental (Clark, 2003: 7). Because Moscow was the political and ideological centre of the Soviet Union, plans to rebuild it became a pressing policy issue beginning in the early 1930s, and by the end of the decade the surface of Moscow was "purified" and monumentalized through landscape amendments such as increased green space, the widening and refurbishing of city streets, and new buildings constructed in the newly minted socialist realist style.⁶ Indeed, in the foreword to his travel account entitled *Moscow 1937*, the German-Jewish novelist Lion Feuchtwanger begins with the missive that:

⁵ The sharply divided binary opposition of sacred/profane is commonly encountered in Russian culture. See Petrone (2000), Davies (1997a), Clark (2000), and Lotman and Uspenskij (1984). However, it should be noted that the concept of the sacred/profane dialectic originated in the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965).

⁶ Moscow's draft master plan was approved in July 1935 by a Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Clark (2003:10) notes that one of the recurring clichés in the socialist realist literature of the 1930s is that "all of Moscow is under scaffolding," implying that the newly forged socialist city would soon emerge from under its former cocoon. However, the utopian city planning schemes devised in the 1920s were largely abandoned by the early 1930s, and only the central city was significantly changed. For an overview of the Moscow city plan, see Posokhin (1980). It should be noted the Soviet drive to influence and alter urban space was not limited to Moscow. See Kotkin (1995) for an analysis of the creation of a Soviet industrial city and Bell (1999) for an exploration of how Tashkent was reconfigured in the Soviet 1930s.

Actually, this account should bear the title: “Moscow, January 1937,” for things are moving so quickly in Moscow that many observations lose their truth in a very few months. I met people there who knew their Moscow well, but who hardly recognized their own city when they saw it again after an absence of six months.

The centrepiece of Moscow’s transformation was the metro, a grandiose transportation project in which each underground station exhibited a unique architectural design selected by *Metrostroi*, the agency in charge of construction. Beginning in 1937 and persisting until the end of the Stalin period, each station also included original works of art that conformed to the aesthetic of the era – socialist realism – which dictated that art should be realistic and easily understood by the people: rather than critically representing life in the present, socialist realist art was meant to optimistically represent life as it would be in the joyous socialist future.⁷

As socialist realist works, art in the Moscow metro was intended to function as an instrument to socialize the masses. To one contemporary commentator,

The Metropoliten is not simply a station where one waits for trains infinitely among bags and suitcases, using this time to appreciate the beauty of the murals. In the metro, one doesn’t wait. It carries users quickly and regularly, therefore monumental-decorative art needs to be expressive, yet simple... The viewer must perceive it at first glance. At the same time, it must enrich the viewer aesthetically, just as a sculpture would (Shadr, “Moskva” 1934-35 in Shadr, p. 124, quoted in Gérin, p. 157).

This quotation raises the question: who exactly were these viewers, and what would they have been looking at? In the 1930s the average Muscovite had significantly changed since the previous decade – with the onset of Stalin’s first Five Year Plan in 1928 and the congruent industrialization drive, the urban population in Moscow increased exponentially, creating a potential crisis for the new Soviet state. The period 1929-1941

⁷There is a vast literature pertaining to socialist realism and its manifestation in the various artistic disciplines. For examples see Clark (2000), Kotkin (1995) and Robin (1992).

witnessed unprecedented migration to the Soviet capital: during the years 1931-1932 alone the population in Moscow swelled by one million people, and by the end of the decade the population had grown from 2.2 to 4.1 million inhabitants (Hoffman, 1994). Thus, at least half of the people experiencing the art in the newly opened metro stations of the mid to late 1930s were not native urban-dwellers, but peasants for whom contact with official forms of Soviet culture had often been quite limited.⁸

Gérin (2000) argues that because at least half of Moscow's population by the late 1930s was composed of recent migrants to the city, viewers would not have possessed the skills necessary to decode socialist realist art. Indeed, most peasants' artistic experience was limited to traditional forms of folk expression, such as religious icons and *lubki* - painted blocks of wood that expressed rural ideals. In addition, Hoffman (1994) has shown that many traditional rural beliefs and practices persisted long after migrants moved to the city, thus delaying their wholesale integration into the Soviet project and consequent familiarity with official forms of culture.

Rapid rural to urban migration was not the only major change occurring during this timeframe. The Soviet 1930s has been aptly termed a "quicksand society" (Lewin, 1985) due to rapid urbanization, as well as the massive social changes that occurred in conjunction with Stalin's Second Five Year Plan. Whereas the 1920s had been characterized by revolutionary utopianism and egalitarianism, the Stalin era favoured a much more traditional and state-centred approach to social change. Roughly at the same time as Stalin's Second Five Year Plan, unveiled in 1932, hierarchies that had been abandoned during the revolutionary era and the 1920s as bourgeois or exploitative were

⁸ For example, despite the rural collectivization of the early 1930s, the diary of collective farmer Ignat Danilovich Frolov reveals that his contact with official Soviet discourse in the 1930s occurred only once a year, on the annual celebration of the October Revolution (Petrone, 2000). See also Davies (1997).

reintroduced into Soviet life, with corresponding policy shifts in the realms of education, the military, the family, religion, and industry. Following closely on the heels of the Second Five Year Plan was the corresponding announcement in the art world: socialist realism was declared to be the official Soviet aesthetic at the All-Union Soviet Writer's Congress in 1934, putting an end to a decade of artistic experimentation and innovation.⁹ Hence, when the metro stations of the second line opened in 1937 replete with works of socialist realist art, socialist realism was still a relatively new style still in the process of being canonized.¹⁰ Moreover, even in the brief period of its existence, socialist realist ideals were prone to shift in accordance with the winds of political change (Gérin, 2000; Bonnell, 1997, Clark, 1993).¹¹ As such, because much of Moscow was made up of newcomers with little artistic experience, coupled with the fact that socialist realism was a recent and fluid entity, we can assume that no ingrained cultural framework yet existed for the interpretation of the artwork in Moscow's "underground palaces."

The next question one must then ask is, if the splendours of socialism were best witnessed below Moscow's surface, what exactly were Muscovites confronted with as they descended underground? The station that I will be analyzing in this thesis is

⁹ Compared to the Civil War and the Stalin period, the NEP era of the 1920s was a period of relative artistic freedom; numerous artistic associations were established and devoted to expressing the ideals of the revolution. However, the declaration of 1934 put an end to many of the artistic movements of the previous decade – including the well-known Soviet avant-garde, many of whose artists were compelled to adapt to the new socialist realist style. Despite the official transition to socialist realism, Gérin (2000) notes that Alexander Deineka's mosaics that decorate the cupolas in Mayakovskaya Metro Station (1937) display overt design references to his former career as an avant-gardist, such as distorted perspectives and ambiguously sexed bodies.

¹⁰ This is not to suggest that socialist realism was alien to Soviet artistic practice – on the contrary, the majority of artwork produced prior to 1934 was done in the realist style. However, socialist realism was unique in that it eschewed critical realism – such as that practiced by the well-known 19th century Russian artistic grouping the Itinerants – in favour of unabashed optimism in its representation. By the latter half of the 1940s socialist realism's idealized set of images and clichés was more readily identifiable to the public than it was in the 1930s.

¹¹ For a good discussion of how official policy affected socialist realist poster art, see Bonnell (1997).

Sverdlov Square station,¹² one of the first metro stations to include representative art in its construction.¹³ In this station, the viewer/passenger was presented with a series of neoclassical bas-relief sculptures depicting a troupe of multi-cultural folk dancers. The question of how these socialist realist images may have been received by their contemporary viewers – and what they could have meant in the context of the Soviet 1930s – is the main focus of the present study.

This thesis aims to build upon the existing bedrock of scholarship within Soviet studies that affirms that meaning, even when it is tightly controlled by the state, remains shifting and unstable. For this reason, I have chosen to base my analysis in semiotic theory. Semiotics is centrally concerned with reception: it does not set out to produce interpretations of works of art, but rather to investigate the processes by which viewers make sense of what they see. This perspective emphasizes the multivocality of signs, the multiplicity of interpretations, and the unstable nature of cultural production. Central to this view is the idea that signs do not exist unto themselves, but must be linked to the broader social context in order to animate them with meaning. This is not to say that the images in the metro do not have any explicit meaning: the artwork that I will be analyzing has many links to the official discourse of the 1930s, to which I will often refer. However, the semiotic approach assumes that there is nothing an artist can do to ensure that the meaning of an artwork will be “correctly” received by its intended audience – because life experiences are multiple and knowledge is partial, a work of art

¹² Sverdlov Square station opened in September of 1938. It was named after Yakov Sverdlov, a Bolshevik revolutionary, party leader and close ally of Vladimir Lenin. He died of influenza in 1918. Sverdlov Square station was later renamed and is now known as *Teatralnaya*, in reference to the many theatres in its direct vicinity.

¹³ Representative art refers to art based on images that are easily legible to a viewer, as opposed to abstract art, which does not have a reference point in the real world.

cannot fix in advance any of its encounters with a given viewer. This fracturing and fragmentation of meaning will form the bulk of my analysis.

CHAPTER TWO – Literature Review

The following literature review draws upon three bodies of scholarship: first, socialist realism as it was manifested predominantly in art during the Stalinist 1930s; second, monument and public art, predominantly as addressed by cultural geographers; and third, scholarly writing on the Moscow metro. These areas are salient because they are bound up with the production of meaning in the built environment. The first facet of my literature review draws together work within Soviet scholarship that acknowledges the polyvalent nature of socialist realism. The second facet positions the art and architecture within Sverdlov Square station as occupying an interstice between public art and monument, and the third explores the ways in which previous work has conceptualized the Moscow metro to be part of the Soviet discourse of socialism.

Socialist Realism, Art and the Stalin Era

Socialist realism was not just confined to visual art, but encompassed all spheres of cultural production from mass media to opera, literature to architecture. For much of the twentieth century Western scholars gave little attention to the socialist realist art produced during the Stalin years, on the grounds that it contained little artistic merit. However, the publication of Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* in 1980 significantly reoriented the field of Soviet studies. *The Soviet Novel* was the first scholarly work in English to analyze the inner workings of socialist realist cultural production. Clark's book examines the pre-Revolutionary origins of socialist realism and discusses the literary devices used by socialist realist writers to convey meaning, thus

giving a far more nuanced analysis of socialist realism than the topic had theretofore received.¹⁴

Clark's insights into the socialist realist novel soon began to be applied to other fields of cultural production including visual art more specifically (Groys, 2003, 1992; Bown, 1998, 1991; Kelly and Shepherd, 1998; Reid, 1998; Bown and Taylor, 1993, Günther, 1990). Matthew Cullerne Bown (1991, 1998) was among the first Western scholars to take a sustained look at socialist realism specifically as it related to the visual arts. Bown's books *Art Under Stalin* and *Socialist Realist Painting* offer a detailed account of artistic production under Stalin, demonstrating that more differences in style and thematic matter existed among Soviet artists than had previously been appreciated by Western scholars. Following shortly thereafter was the edited collection *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Bown and Taylor, 1993). Although broad in scope, the collection nonetheless made new contributions to the study of socialist realism in the various fields of cultural production.

While the study of socialist realism and its relation to everyday life under Stalin has long been of interest to Soviet scholars, the field has undergone accelerated changes since the early 1990s due to the opening of the Soviet archives and the expansion of cultural and critical studies into the discipline.¹⁵ One of the new themes that gained

¹⁴The use of positive heroes, personal sacrifice, the protection against enemies both from the interior and the exterior of the Soviet Union and the Soviet "great family" (with Stalin as the head) were common literary devices used by Socialist Realist writers in the 1930s.

¹⁵ During the Cold War era, Soviet historiography was roughly categorized by two schools of thought: the totalitarian model and the revisionist model. The totalitarian model supposed that an all-powerful government ruled over a passive, defenseless society. Revisionist scholars eschewed this historical model as overly simplistic, and instead argued that the Soviet populace was not wholly atomized and disenfranchised, but that human agency existed and many people even lent tacit support to the policies and practices of the era. The usefulness of the totalitarian/revisionist binary distinction has since been called into question, however, as it overlooked the nuanced analyses with which the majority of scholars on both sides of the supposed division have engaged.

popularity within the scholarship is that of resistance (for examples see Hellbeck, 2000; Davies, 1997b; Viola, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Hoffman, 1994).¹⁶ In her study of popular opinion in the 1930s, Davies (1997) uses newly opened archives to examine how Soviet officials resisted and circumvented state policy. Examples include what Kotkin (1995) terms “speaking Bolshevik” – the use of official terms and Soviet neologisms for the purpose of having one’s own needs met, as well as maintaining a private identity (through activities such as journaling) and outright revolt.

If we choose to view such alternative readings of official discourse as “resistance,” it should be noted that much of this data remains speculative. It is quite challenging to discern what people were actually thinking based on official Party and NKVD records, both because the general populace felt compelled to acquiesce to official policy for fear of reprisal, and because it was likely that officials exaggerated dissenting behaviour in order to further their own careers.¹⁷ However, what has clearly emerged from this body of scholarship is the idea that Soviet subjectivity was an active construction involving a complex symbiosis between self, state, and society.¹⁸

The work I have principally relied on uses, for the most part, methods that involve the analysis of historical records, newspapers, and diaries in order to construct the argument that Stalinist subjectivity was highly complex. While she does not deal with

¹⁶ For a full elucidation of recent trends in Soviet historiography see Beer (2005). Resistance in this context refers to Scott’s (1990) idea that subalterns use hidden transcripts to resist domination.

¹⁷ Recent research suggests that even as the Soviet populace expressed alternative points of view, they still used the official points of reference. As Jochen Hellbeck argues, “Soviet subjects owed their ability to speak out to their self-alignment with the revolutionary master-narrative... a subjective stance against the Revolution threatened to engender a loss of self and total powerlessness” (2000, 95). Hellbeck (1996) uses the journal of Stepan Podlubnyi during the 1930s as a paradigmatic example to illustrate that even when expressing frustration and dissent, Podlubnyi consistently adhered to the Soviet worldview and its official categories of analysis. See also Hellbeck (2001).

¹⁸ For an excellent overview of subjectivity in Soviet studies, see Krylova (2000). Krylova notes that it was Sheila Fitzpatrick in the 1970s that first implied that human agency could exist under Stalin.

socialist realist art *per se*, Karen Petrone (2000) does an excellent job of linking socialist realist practice and visual culture with their potential meaning(s) and implication(s) for Stalinist subjectivity. Using Soviet public celebrations as analytic vehicles – including parades in honour of physical culture, New Years Day and the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution – Petrone dissects how these events often misconstrued official ideology due in part to poor organization and their inability to avoid disorder.

Interesting from a geographic perspective is Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman's (2003) edited collection *The landscape of Stalinism: the art and ideology of Soviet space*. The collection of essays explores the representation of space and landscape in the culture of the Stalin period, including phenomena such as art, literature, song, advertising, theatre, media and postage stamps. Although the essays in the collection deal with both space and place in the geographic sense – space as an abstract concept and place as a concept laden with socio-cultural meaning – this distinction is not clearly articulated by the editors. Regardless, the collection succeeds in illustrating the importance of space and place in Stalinist culture.

While the study of the culture of the Stalin period has blossomed into a rich and variegated field of research, the visual arts have received less sustained attention than other forms of cultural production within this subfield. Gérin (2000) and Edele (1999) are interested in the multiplicity of meanings that may have emerged from a given work of art, and significant attention is given to teasing out ambiguities and contradictions inherent in much of socialist realist artistic production. Bassin (2000) has done similar work in analyzing art critics' responses to landscape art in the Stalinist period, arguing that the aim of achieving a unified perspective on this form of cultural production was

never realized. As a whole, this body of work deals with the complexities and contradictions encountered by cultural consumers – be they art critics or the public – in attempting to understand socialist realist production according to its officially sanctioned meaning. My work on the socialist realist art in Sverdlov Square station aims to contribute to this field of scholarship.

Space and Representation

From the outset, Soviet authorities recognized the central importance of space in their construction of a socialist utopia. Social theorist Henri Lefebvre observes that a revolution which does not produce a new space has not changed life in any substantial way – it has merely tinkered with the ideological superstructure (1991: 54). Additionally, geographer Tim Cresswell makes a convincing case for the intertwined nature of space and ideology (1996). He argues that social and spatial engineering are always inextricably linked: place is the optimal forum for ideology to link the concrete and the abstract (i.e. the church, which is both an edifice and a belief system) because once spatial organization and structures are arranged, they are rarely questioned. To be sure, public art plays a large role in anchoring ideology in space; the contemporary version of public monuments emerged in the latter middle ages, and was linked to the period of European exploration and nation building. Public art thus comprised a key component of state discourse, as it invariably focused public attention on figurative images of exploration as well as those of military figures and events (Miles, 1997).

Geographers' interest in public art has stemmed from a more general interest in the role of landscape in reproducing dominant ideologies (Cosgrove, 1998; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Duncan and Duncan, 1988). Although geographic inquiries into ideology

and public art did not begin in earnest until the early 1990s, scholarly antecedents date back to David Harvey's (1979) influential work on the construction and meaning of the Sacre Coeur Basilica in Paris. Harvey shows how the construction of the Basilica was a conscious attempt by the Second Republic to efface the legacy of the Paris Commune, thus raising the issue of how memory and ideology is mediated in urban space. Similarly important, albeit less influential for geographers, was Schorske's (1979) investigation into the redesign of the Ringstrasse in nineteenth-century Vienna, in which he argues that the construction of the Ringstrasse was a visual expression of a triumphant middle class. Since this early work, the bulk of geographic enquiry into public art has focused on official, public monuments.¹⁹ Scholars have investigated topics including gender and monuments (Monk, 1992; Warner, 1985) and war memorials (Vertinsky, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Young, 1989). Much of this work has focused on how public art acts as a hegemonic discourse that attempts to impose state-sanctioned messages on public space (Benton-Short, 2006; Johnson, 1995). However, researchers have also been careful to assert that public art is not inert, but is interpreted by individuals in ways that are not necessarily in accordance with their official meaning (Gough, 2002; Bell, 1999; Levinson, 1998; Gormley, 1998; Withers, 1996; Charlesworth, 1994; Duncan, 1993; Duncan and Duncan, 1988).

¹⁹ Although some contemporary work has focused on "new genre" public art (Sharp, 2007; Lacy, 1993; Deutshe, 1991) – public art projects that focus on social issues, and in which artists seek to engage the local community in the process of creating art – such work has been the exception rather than the rule. Malcolm Miles' *Art, Space and the City* (1997) has devoted the most sustained attention to public art, drawing on critical writing from the fields of geography, urban studies and social theory. According to Miles (1997: 5), a generic definition for public art refers to "works commissioned for sites of open public access." The term "public art" is most often used as an umbrella term, with monuments and memorials comprising sub-classifications. Although attempts have been made to more precisely classify these sub- genres of public art (Sidway and Mayell, 2007; Gough, 2002; Miles, 1997), such attempts have yet to gain significant traction within the scholarly literature.

Further, the contested nature of monuments, both in the stage of their creation (Sargin, 2004; Gough and Morgan, 2004; Hoelsher and Alderman, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Young, 1989) and after their installation (Osborne, 2002; Charlesworth 1994) has been a significant source of inquiry. One of the most widely cited works in this vein is Johnson (1995), whose research focuses on the Parnell monument in Dublin and how its meaning has shifted and been contested over time. Perhaps the foremost Canadian geographer engaging with the topic of how the meaning of public art is contested is Brian Osborne (2002), who has shown how the representation of Louis Riel in monumental form (particularly in Regina and Winnipeg) has evolved throughout the period 1885-2001, aligning with the national discourses of nation building, Western alienation and multiculturalism.

Gough (2004, 2002) has done the most work in regard to linking public art, contested meanings and semiotics. For example, Gough (2002) discusses the UN Peacekeeping monument in Ottawa, outlining the process leading to the monument's erection, and comparing and contrasting the messages of the monument to the reality of Canada's role in international peacekeeping in the twentieth century. Gough analyzes the form and content of the peacekeeping monument, *The Reconciliation*, contrasting the idealism of the monument to the conduct of Canadians in the Somali Civil War. Gough concludes that the symbolic function of the monument was mostly fabricated, and was, moreover, out of touch with the reality of Canadian involvement in global conflict. Gough alludes to but does not fully develop the idea that Canadian conduct in Somalia jeopardizes the official reading of the monument.

Finally, the study of memory has recently become an interdisciplinary pursuit taken up by researchers in the social sciences and humanities, including geography. Taking their cue largely from the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and French historian Pierre Nora (1989), geographers have pursued a line of study that conceptualizes memory as a social activity and awards it an active role in the articulation of group identity. One of Nora's (1989) central arguments is that "sites of memory only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (Nora, 1989: 19). Similarly, Maurice Halbwachs has argued that particular sites can rekindle memories of past events and thus aid in the formation of collective memory. Consequently, there is a sizeable literature analyzing the means by which public art and architecture influences and/or elides collective memory (James, 2006; Simpson and Corbridge, 2006; Osborne, 2001; McCann, 1999; Charlesworth, 1994).

The bulk of academic research on public art deals with how ideology and memory are constructed and/or reinforced in space via monuments and memorials. However, there is less analysis of the ways in which signs within a work of art can both reinforce and contest official discourse. This thesis aims to bolster the idea that memory, rather than being a passive entity which can be constructed and manipulated by social forces, is an active force that may instead challenge and question the officially-sanctioned meaning of public art endeavours.

Socialist Values and the Moscow Metro

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of the Moscow metro in establishing a sacred space to enshrine the new social order.²⁰ The first scholarly work in English devoted to the topic is William K. Wolf's PhD dissertation (1994), which gives an overview of the construction process of the first line of the metro (completed in 1935). Wolf's dissertation focuses on the technical aspects of the construction and deals more generally with the transformative nature of Soviet work, rather than with the meaning of the art and architecture within the first line stations themselves. Moran (2008) also writes about the transformative nature of Soviet work, and deals obliquely with the Moscow metro in the process of doing so. She writes about the use of precious and semi-precious stone in Soviet material culture in the 1920s and 1930s, relating this discussion to the remaking of Soviet labour as well as the rehabilitation of stone – most notably marble – from pre-Revolutionary luxury to Soviet socialist good. She argues that the extensive use of marble in the first and second lines of the Moscow metro stations helped validate the stone as an appropriate material for constructing Soviet material culture, in addition to contributing to the officially-sanctioned colour and design symbolism of the underground stations.

Several scholars have also investigated how the Moscow metro acted as a symbol of Soviet achievement. Jenks (2000) examines the Moscow metro as an instrument of social and technological engineering. He argues that the metro used aesthetic and ideological work as a method of affirming Soviet might, converting peasants into ideal urbanites and proclaiming socialist values. Likewise, Ryklin (2003)

²⁰ For a provocative analysis of the metaphor of underground systems such as railways, subways, sewage and electrical systems in a broader European context, see Williams (1990).

discursively analyzes significant speeches made by Party leaders in the 1930s in order to demonstrate how the metro was popularly conceived as the best in the world and the antithesis to capitalist subway systems that prioritized profit over people. While these studies shed light on the official imperatives of the metro project, they do not specifically refer to the socialist realist art installed within the system, or to the implications of its presence.

In 2000 the journal *Studies in the Decorative Arts* devoted a special issue to describing and analyzing the art found in four of the most prominent Moscow metro stations constructed in the 1930s – Dinamo, Mayakovskii, Revolution Square and Sverdlov Square (Friedman, 2000; Kettering, 2000a; Kettering, 2000b; Wunsche, 2000). While the collection largely focuses on the overarching design imperatives of the four stations, the authors also analyze the art present within each station as it relates to official discourse.²¹ For example, Kettering’s (2000b) analysis of Sverdlov Square station links the artwork to the discourse of equality propagated by the 1936 Stalin Constitution, and will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

Gerin’s (2000) PhD dissertation is unique in that it explores the meaning(s), ambiguities, and potentially disruptive nature of artistic images found in Mayakovskaya metro station. In her dissertation Gerin argues that the images of Mayakovskaya metro station do not constitute icons, as icons convey a stable message that the average person is able to understand. Instead, due to the many cultural, economic, and political upheavals that occurred during the 1930s, Gerin argues that images in the metro are highly ambivalent, and potentially open to multiple (and subversive) interpretations. Part

²¹ Hall (1997:44) explains Foucault’s concept of discourse as “... a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – ie, a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic.”

of her argument is that myth,²² as defined by Barthes, is an inapplicable concept in the Stalinist 1930s, when values were being formed and were not yet stable and transparent. Although much of Gerin's theoretical underpinning is analogous to my own, her analysis proceeds quite differently. She analyzes the first seven images in the cycle using the lens of the body, the next seven according to space, and the third seven using time as the theoretical construct. While the rationale for this approach is unclear and goes unexplained, the resulting analysis remains informative and illuminating.

More recently, art historian Mike O'Mahony (2006, 2003) has dealt with the 1930s metro stations thematically, publishing on the intersections between art and physical culture, a practice widely propagated by the state during this decade. His book *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture - Visual Culture* devotes one chapter to analyzing the art of the four main stations of the 1930s. However, his earlier (2003) publication is the more imaginative of the two pieces. In this work, O'Mahony devotes sustained attention to Revolution Square, whose statues of individual heroes – among them Red Army soldiers, workers and collective farmers – commemorate Soviet history from the October Revolution to the socialist realist present/future. He links the statues to Soviet attitudes toward the body in the 1930s, suggesting that the visible evolution in the statue ensemble – from old, grizzled Bolsheviks of the 1920s to young, lithe Soviets of the 1930s – dovetails with the expansion of eugenics in Russia and abroad.²³

²² Barthes conceives of myth as a high order sign that is reached through several levels of connotation. See Chapter Three.

²³ Eugenics refers to the belief that the human species could be improved through selective breeding.

Conclusion

Due to the prominence of the Moscow metro as a technological achievement and ideological construct in the Soviet 1930s, many previous scholars have engaged with it as a topic of study. My approach differs from most of those mentioned in this chapter in that I attempt to focus on the multivocality of art and design in the metro, rather than on state-sanctioned themes and official discourse. My aim in analyzing Sverdlov Square station is two-fold: to explore themes that have thus far been neglected, such as folk culture, gender, and the nationalities, and to tease out some the many contradictions between the real and the represented in the Stalinist 1930s. By doing so, I will suggest that the metro, constructed as a highly regulated space by the Soviet regime, can also be usefully understood as an ambiguous space where ideological boundaries were shifting and ill-defined.

CHAPTER THREE - Method

This thesis uses poststructuralist semiotics as the method with which to decode the art and architecture in Sverdlov Square station. Chapter three will give an overview of the field of semiotics in addition to an introduction to how semiotic concepts are commonly applied. To be sure, there are a number of methods that can be used to examine how images make meaning; the art historical practice of compositional analysis and Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis are two such examples.²⁴ However, I would suggest that semiotic analysis is an apt tool to apply to the Soviet 1930s due to the all-encompassing nature of socialist realism. Socialist realism was self-consciously intertextual; cultural prescriptions made by the Party elite were echoed in the media as well as forms of communication such as art and architecture.²⁵ Semiotic analysis can be seen as a complement to this all-encompassing worldview, as it is interested in the comprehensive study of the communication of meaning. As Sless (1986: 1) notes, “we consult linguists to find out about language, art historians or critics to find out about paintings, and anthropologists to find out how people in different societies signal to each other through gesture, dress or decoration. But if we want to know what all these things have in common then we need to find someone with a semiotic point of view, a vantage point from which to survey our world.”

It should be noted from the outset that there are three stages at which meaning making occurs: the production of an image, the reception of an image, and the site of an image itself (Rose 2003: 16). While all three of these components are integral to

²⁴ For an overview of these and other critical visual methodologies, see Rose (2003).

²⁵ The concept of intertextuality refers to how each text exists in relation to other texts. See Kristeva (1980).

complete understanding, most researchers will prioritize one component in order to avoid the “analytical incoherence” which might otherwise arise (Rose 2003: 29).

Consequently, this paper will consider the site of the image – that is, the image itself – as key to meaning making. I have chosen to focus on the site of the image for several reasons. Firstly, as I noted in the previous chapter, there is already a rich body of work within the field of Soviet studies that deals with the production of socialist realist phenomena in the Stalinist 1930s. Further, the historic period that I am dealing with presents obvious difficulties in studying people’s reception to images, and written records from the Stalin era can be problematic, as discussed in Chapter Two. The site of the image is a fruitful vein of analysis because it has not yet been analyzed as extensively as the production of the image, nor does it present as many difficulties as an analysis of reception.

Semiotics is defined as the study of signs, where a sign is an entity that stands for something other than itself. Contemporary semiotics has its antecedents in logic and linguistic theory, in which fields it was simultaneously developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1955) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) near the turn of the twentieth century.²⁶ This chapter will focus on semiotics as it was developed by these figures and their principal adherents. Since its inception, semiotics has been taken up in a vast number of academic disciplines about which it will not be possible to elaborate.²⁷ As a result, I will be concerned with theories specifically pertaining to the study of visual images, drawing

²⁶ Throughout this paper, I will use the term “contemporary semiotics” to refer to the practice that is variously called socio-semiotics, visual semiotics, and poststructural semiotics. Use of this phrase denotes the field as it has developed since Derrida’s critique of Saussurean semiotics.

²⁷ Semiotics has been applied to written text, music, images, and theatre, as well as architecture and the built environment. Barthes (1989) is a classic example of semiotics being applied to the study of cultural phenomena. In the discipline of geography, see Duncan and Duncan’s (1988) touchstone article in which they assert that the built environment can be read as a text.

primarily on ideas espoused by the discipline of art history. In this discipline, the primary concern of semiotic analysis is not interpreting works of art or assessing their merit, but in investigating how images are intelligible to those who view them (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 184). As in other disciplines, semiotics as practiced by art historians views representation not as the reflection of a neutral reality, but as an active and constitutive force in society (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 195).

I will begin my overview of semiotics with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a French linguist who developed semiotics as a method to deconstruct written texts. Saussure espoused the notion that meaning is arbitrary – there is no commonsense meaning implicit in any written text, but that all meaning is culturally defined. Saussurean semiotics is comprised of several important concepts, the most prominent of which is the sign. In Saussure's view, the sign is comprised of two elements that are inextricably linked one to the other – the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the element that stands for the signified, or concept. For example, the visual signifier of a rose could refer to a signified of a) a flower, or b) the concept of love.

According to Saussure, the system of words and meanings, combined with the rules of their usage, is called language. In order to map out the meaning of words in a particular language, Saussure conceived of two structures, *langue* and *parole*. The *langue* was a universal set of rules that structure the association of words and meanings. This construct is distinct from *parole*, which was the actual spoken language that humans learn in order to express themselves. For Saussure, these structures in language were doubly articulated. On the one hand, words were seen to unfold over time, or diachronically, according to the syntagmatic axis. For example, the words in the sentence

“they had coffee in the afternoon” make sense in the context of the words that come before and after. By contrast, “the had afternoon they coffee in” is nonsensical to the English speaker precisely because it does not follow the established rule of the syntagmatic axis. The paradigmatic axis refers to the string of associated words that could be chosen in place of, for example, coffee, such as “hot chocolate,” “tea,” or “cappuccino.” These absent but associated words constitute the paradigmatic axis of meaning. For Saussure, all language is based on such relations, and structured through the contrasts deployed by the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. These axes in turn structure the language, and constitute a system of signification that arises by way of the culturally imposed rules of association and combination, called the code (See Saussure, 1983).

Although Saussure did not develop the application of semiotics to media other than written texts, he did suggest that “[o]ne can conceive of a science that studies the life of signs at the heart of social life... Linguistics is only one part of this general science” (1983: 33). Similarly, Bal and Bryson (1991: 176) suggest that “[the fact] that semiotics has been primarily developed in conjunction with literary texts is perhaps largely a historical accident whose consequences, while not unimportant, can be bracketed.” The most prominent scholar to take up Saussure’s semiotic project and apply it to material culture was Roland Barthes. Barthes’ academic career can be divided into two halves: the semiotic phase which characterized his work prior to 1970, and the deconstruction phase that ensued after Derrida’s sweeping critique of structuralism, which I will discuss in the coming pages. Despite the schism in his career, Barthes’ early work is considered a valid antecedent to contemporary critiques of material culture (Rose, 2003; Gottdeiner,

1995). His key project was to take what might be considered a natural phenomenon and show that it is in fact a cultural construction and a product of history (See Bal and Bryson, 1991). In addition to extending the field of semiotics from written texts to material culture, Barthes also made several important theoretical contributions.

In Barthes' modified notion of the sign, he made a significant distinction between denotation and connotation. A denoted meaning is essentially the sign as articulated by Saussure: that is, a signifier clearly refers to a particular object or concept, and can be easily understood as such. By contrast, Barthes extended this theory to include a connoted level of meaning, one that refers to a culturally determined implication. For example, a pair of Nike running shoes might *denote* "footwear used for sports," but might also *connote* a high social status for the person wearing them. Barthes referred to this higher level of meaning as a second order sign, the process by which systems of signs articulate with cultural values.

Barthes' (1989) groundbreaking work on the semiotics of culture, *Mythologies*, elaborated this view of levels of signification, and remains a key exegesis on how cultural values are embodied in material culture. In this book he introduced the concept of the myth, a high order sign that is reached through several levels of connotation. For example, a pair of Nike running shoes that connote high status might in turn connote the widespread Western goals of progress and technology, thus achieving the status of myth. He also developed the notion of logotechniques, which refers to the use of ideology for the control of consumption. In addition, Barthes – along with Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin – expanded upon Saussure's static notion of the sign. Barthes and Bakhtin espoused the idea of polysemy and multivocality, respectively. Essentially, they believed

that any sign might be open to multiple readings; there is nothing to ensure that individuals who encounter a sign will necessarily interpret it in exactly the same fashion.

Despite Barthes' and Bakhtin's significant contributions to semiotic theory, the practice of semiotics was irrevocably altered with the publication of Jacques Derrida's (1976) scathing critique of structuralism. Indeed, his monograph *Of Grammatology* is widely credited with the undoing of structuralist thought - and, by extension, Saussurean semiotics, due to the latter's reliance on the static binary oppositions of signifier/signified, *langue/parole*, and syntagmatic/paradigmatic axes.²⁸

Poststructuralists were adamant that meaning is dynamic: rather than the product of stable and immobile systems, poststructuralist theorists affirmed the polysemous and constantly shifting nature of images and text. Derrida played a major role in asserting this viewpoint, arguing that there were no one-to-one correspondences between a signifier and signified, and that such a dual construct itself was overly contrived and without merit. Moreover, he insisted that the meaning of a sign could not be discerned by studying the internal operations of a synchronic system, but that meaning arises from movement from one sign to the next. However, his most damning criticism was that of the "linguistic fallacy" - namely, the semiotic belief that all cultural systems structured as a language could communicate as a language. Deconstructionism posited that language systems depend on social convention - and are in fact so dependent on social convention so as to render them completely artificial. This charge altered semiotic practice in the most fundamental manner, but as we shall see, was adequately addressed by Umberto

²⁸ Structuralist thought in this context refers to the idea that there was a one-to-one correspondence between a signifier and a signified, and that meaning was essentially static and unchanging.

Eco (1976), a semiotician working in the Piercian tradition to whom our attention will shortly turn.

As Gottdeiner (1995) points out, much of Derrida's critique of Saussurean semiotics had been previously addressed by semioticians such as Barthes and Bakhtin. Indeed, both of these theorists attested to multivocality and the fact that meaning does not rely unambiguously on a unified sign. Nonetheless, in the wake of Derrida's critique of Saussurean semiotics, many prominent semioticians practicing in the Saussurean tradition, including Barthes, abandoned the project all together. In place of semiotics, Derrida proposed deconstruction, a method broadly concerned with the ways that meaning is constructed and understood by writers, texts, and readers.²⁹ However, deconstruction has faced its own share of criticism, which I will discuss after an explanation of Peirce's theory of semiotics.

In contrast to Saussure, the semiotic method developed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914) was never associated with structuralism. Interestingly, Peirce's ideas were largely eclipsed by the popularity of Saussure in the French academy, and they did not gain currency until Derrida had discounted Saussure's rigid structuralism (Gottdeiner, 1995). In contrast to Saussure, Peirce's ideas were borne out of a complex logical system, some concepts of which have become central to the development of semiotic criticism. Because Peirce was more concerned with knowledge as opposed to strictly communication, his insights are far more applicable to the domain of material culture.

Peirce's tripartite definition of the sign is as follows:

²⁹ Chandler (2002: 115) provides a succinct overview of deconstruction's most salient points.

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (Peirce, 1985: 5).

A sign, then, is a representamen with a mental interpretant. Such a concept of the sign is inherently predisposed to dynamism; as soon as a mental image takes shape, it becomes a new sign, which then yields a new interpretant (Bal and Bryson 1991: 189). As opposed to Saussure, whose idealist notion of the signifier/signified obviated any material reality, the material world is implicit in Peirce's theory of the sign. In effect, the interpretant mediates between the representamen and the object – signs exist both in the real world as well as in our consciousness, an important aspect of contemporary semiotics. This apparently small modification allows Peircian semiotics to analyze the relationship between representation and culture, rather than just language and speech.

Peirce's most well known contribution to the field of semiotics is his typology of the sign, which consists of icon, symbol, and index. In the iconic mode, the signifier bears a likeness to the signified – a photograph, for example, is an iconic representation of the person whose image it replicates. By contrast, in the symbolic mode the signifier does not resemble the signified – the connection between the two is purely arbitrary (i.e.; language). The symbol is what resembles Saussure's notion of the sign most closely. In the indexical mode, the signifier is not arbitrary but is connected to the signified in some way - such as a footprint representing the person who made it (Peirce, 1985). Likewise, because Peircian semiotics deals with signs whose denotative meaning(s) can be discerned without a vast knowledge of their cultural context (index and icon) as well as

signs that are culturally understood as such (symbols), they are able to deal with all of culture, not just language and systems of communication.

Deconstructionists and contemporary (that is, poststructural) semioticians agree on Peirce's concept of infinite regress – that meaning arises from the endless play of signifiers. The key difference between the two stances is their view on the existence of the material world. Whereas poststructural semioticians espouse the idea that there is a material, objective reality outside the sign, deconstructionists reject this stance. Umberto Eco, in particular, disagreed with Derrida's notion of an infinite play of signifiers. In contrast to ideas espoused by extreme postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard (1983), who claimed that reality has been replaced with the hyperreal,³⁰ Eco (1976) argued that it is overly idealist to suggest that meaning is not ultimately linked to a signified. Indeed, as Gottdeiner (1995) points out, the deconstructionist notion that signs are not anchored to reality is more similar to Saussure's idealistic notion of the sign than its proponents would care to admit.

While Derrida's attack fundamentally altered the way semiotics is practised, it did not signal its demise. Just as it ushered structuralist semiotics out of the academy, it proved to be the harbinger of Peircian semiotics. Derrida's concept of deconstruction proposes that no interpretation of a sign can be privileged over any other, thereby obscuring any reference to knowledge and power (Gottdeiner, 1991; Bal and Bryson, 1991). To be sure, while contemporary semioticians affirm the multivocality of texts, they do not allow this multivocality to elide the fact that some readings are privileged over others, an idea elucidated by the early Barthes as logotechniques.

³⁰ This extreme postmodern stance characterizes Baudrillard's later work, and remains quite popular in the academy. See Baudrillard (1983). Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality refers to the confusion between fantasy and reality that occurs in postmodern society.

Umberto Eco is the most prominent semiotician to take up the Peircian tradition. Applying semiotics to material culture, Eco's main contribution was borne out of his insistence that all signs must be understood in context. As well, he was instrumental in responding to Derrida's critique of the linguistic fallacy. In response to Derrida, he theorized two types of cultural complexes – those that convey intentional meaning, known as systems of communication, and those that are structured as a language but do not convey intentional meaning, which are referred to as systems of signification (Eco, 1976). By eliminating the assumption that all sign systems communicate as a language, contemporary semioticians are able to avoid the charge of linguistic imperialism.

As Bal and Bryson argue in their defence of Peircian semiotics, “the mix of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity that every image presents emphasizes the other side of the illusory unity that the image is so easily assumed to be; its fracturedness, the ‘difference within’ that allows for a view of image-seeing that is dynamic and positioned in time” (1991: 191). Such dynamism makes Peircian semiotics highly compatible with the poststructuralist philosophy that infuses much of academic theory in the present era. Moreover, poststructuralists argue that a text cannot be properly analyzed without due attention given to the context in which it is situated (Lees, 2001; Bondi, 2003). The key distinction between Saussurean and contemporary semiotics is that “[s]emiotics that confines itself to the sign alone... can only describe symbolic relations. Socio-semiotic analysis which includes the symbolic-material articulation – that is, the study of signs and social context – helps *explain* symbolic relations” (Gottdeiner, 1995: 30, emphasis in the original).

The object of study in poststructuralist semiotics is taken to be the articulation between sign systems and exo-semiotic processes of politics and economics while at the same time recognizing the plurality of meaning. Contemporary semioticians Bal and Bryson attest to the fact that “[signs] enter into a plurality of contexts; works of art are constituted by different viewers in different ways at different times and places” (1991: 179). In light of this insight, practitioners engage in semiotic exercises with the knowledge that meaning is plural, and that in any situation there are a myriad of truths which, together, comprise understanding (Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Shurmer-Smith, 2002).

In sum, it is evident that the theory of semiotics has been modified from its origins in structuralist theory. Its development has been anything but linear and straightforward; contemporary practitioners of semiotics espouse a hybrid of theories based predominantly on Peircian notions of the sign and Bakhtinian views on multivocality, while retaining some of Saussurean terminology such as the signifier and signified. While Derrida’s deconstructivist views posed important challenges to flaws within structuralism, one must not go so far as to suggest that it is impossible to determine the meaning invested in signs, nor ignore power relations inherent in everyday life. By virtue of the fact that semiotics assumes that objects and images always communicate more than what is readily apparent on the surface, it is a fitting technique for a critical study of visual images.

Up to this point I have given an overview of the major developments in the semiotic field as a whole. I will now turn my attention to work that specifically pertains to the study of visual images, and I will suggest how this will inform my own thesis. The

field commonly referred to as visual semiotics is based on the assumptions of poststructuralist semiotics, as they have been elucidated in the preceding paragraphs. Major practitioners in this sub-field are Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 2001). In their two books, Kress and Leeuwen outline a grammar of visual design pertaining to pictures; that is, any visual design that is constructed and framed. They underscore the fact that sign-making is always socially and ideologically charged, thereby avoiding the apolitical and decontextualized stance of their structuralist predecessors. Through their visual methodology, they stress the idea that visual images are neither transparent nor easily understood. Although they contribute little that is new in the vein of semiotic theory, the fact that their books are well received and cited attests to the enduring nature of semiotic methodology in the academic study of images and material culture (Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Chandler, 2002; Rose, 2003; Bal and Bryson, 1991).

Case Study

I have applied semiotic concepts to the interpretation of art and architecture in Sverdlov Square station, an underground metro station located in central Moscow on what is the present-day Zamoskvoretskaya Line. Sverdlov Square was designed primarily by architect Ivan Fomin and opened in 1938, two years after the architect's passing (see Figure 1).³¹



Figure 1: Fomin's preliminary design for Sverdlov Square station. From *Arkhitectura SSSR*, 1935, no. 6: 14.

The station embodied the Stalinist tradition of harnessing architecture and art to advance the purposes of the Soviet regime. Extending along the central passage, at a height just above eye-level, stretched a sequence of white porcelain bas-relief sculpture

³¹ Fomin died of a sudden stroke in 1936, after which his design for Sverdlov Square was executed with slight modification by one of his former pupils, Leonid Poliakov (Kettering, 2000b).

executed by the artist Natalia Danko³² of the Lomonosov State Porcelain Factory in Leningrad. Each figure in Danko's series, officially titled "The Daily Life of the Peoples of the USSR" (*Byt narodov SSSR*), was approximately one metre in height and accented with gold. The figures depicted dancers from seven of the largest nationalities in the Soviet Union: Russian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Armenian. Each ethnic group was represented by an adult male and female pair in their national costume, with each couple repeated a total of three times throughout the length of the station. Approximately half of the dancers were depicted playing a musical instrument, and between each pair of dancers was a sculpted wreath that depicted rural produce.

Following Rose (2003:91-2), the brief outline for the semiotic analysis of public art I will employ is as follows:

1. Determine what the signs are.
2. Decide what they signify "in themselves."
3. Think about how they relate to other signs both within the image and in other images.
4. Explore their connections to wider systems of meaning, from codes to dominant codes, referent systems or mythologies.

Return to the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology.

Due to budgetary constraints, I used photographs from Soviet metro-related publications from the 1930s through 1950s as a window into the metro station. While

³² Natalia Danko was a Ukrainian-born artist who established her artistic career in the 1920s by creating porcelain figurines depicting ideal Soviet types (Kettering, 1998). Her work throughout the 1920s and 1930s was closely aligned with Soviet political imperative and the shifting climate of Socialist Realism.

most of the photographs were of reasonable quality, my analysis may be weakened because I could not gain access to the full spectrum of original work. I used Gillian Rose's guidelines in analyzing artwork as sign functions. First, this entailed a detailed description of the art and architecture in the station, in order to grasp the sign vehicles present therein. An interpretation of the signs could not be offered without extensive background research into the political, social, cultural and economic context of the Soviet 1930s, which I conducted both prior to and simultaneous with the task of analysis. Third, I explored what the signs signified on their own terms, that is – the denoted meaning of elevators, benches, pillars, sculptures of dancers, etc. Next I explored the connoted meaning of the signs, which necessarily proceeded along two avenues. The first avenue – an “official” reading – aimed to describe the artistic and political motivation that underpinned the signs in the metro, and connect them to signs outside the world of art. The second avenue – which, in truth, might be more aptly labelled a winding footpath – was far less straightforward. This step involved analyzing the signs using the terms of reference that the average Muscovite might have possessed. Gaining access to the thoughts of individuals from a past era is, of course, exceedingly difficult. However, the aim of this paper is not to present the reader with fact, but rather suggest avenues of interpretation that both challenged and reinforced the dominant ideology of the Soviet 1930s. Thus, while much of this paper is necessarily speculative, it is my hope that the reader finds it nonetheless illuminating.

The following table provides a reference for the basic terms in the semiotic toolkit, to which the reader can refer.

Table 1: Summary of Semiotic Concepts³³

Sign	A sign is an entity that stands for something other than itself. It is an umbrella term: symbols, icons, texts, etc. are all signs or systems of signs.
Sign function	A term essentially synonymous with “sign.” The difference is that “sign function” implies the active conveyance of meaning.
Sign vehicle	The component of the sign that fulfills the sign function.
Icon	A sign that bears a likeness to the object it represents.
Index	A sign that is not arbitrary but is connected to the object it represents in some way.
Symbol	A sign that represents its object through cultural convention
Denotation	Refers to the precise or primary meaning of a sign.
Connotation	Refers to a higher or secondary meaning of a sign.
Code	A culturally constituted set of instruction for interpreting a sign.
Paradigmatic Axis	Refers to the alternatives to a signifier already used.
Syntagmatic Axis	Refers to a linear sequence of signifiers – like moving along a horizontal axis.
Multivocality/polysemy	The concept that a sign has many meanings

³³ Most of the definitions in this table are derived from Colapietro (1993).

CHAPTER FOUR – Art and Architecture in Sverdlov Square Station

Introduction

Chapter four focuses on the design of Sverdlov Square station and the form of the art and architecture therein. In this chapter I attempt to decode how design elements can be read from the perspective of official discourse, as well as how the official reading may have fragmented in the context of the Soviet 1930s. The first section of this chapter uses semiotics to explore the meaning of the architecture and artwork in Sverdlov Square station according to official discourse, thus presupposing a standard, officially acceptable connection between signifier and signified. I first discuss how the station's architectural design promoted the image of a classical above-ground urban space, and move on to discuss how the classical form of Danko's artwork resonates with multiple meanings.

Architecture and Semiotics

According to Barthes, signs can function on two levels – denotative and connotative – a notion that has fruitfully been applied to architecture by Umberto Eco (1980). Eco makes a salient distinction between a structure's primary and secondary functions; primary functions are utilitarian, and thus denoted, and secondary functions are symbolic, and thus connoted. It is at this secondary level of connotation that meaning is communicated. Eco argues that architecture is a form of mass communication for several reasons. To begin, architectural discourse aims at widespread appeal – its form must be readily understood and accepted in order for people to use it effectively. Second, architectural discourse is psychologically persuasive – one is prompted to follow the instructions in a building without realizing the underlying design imperatives. For example, while a hallway is designed to facilitate movement from one end to the other,

someone walking through a hallway may not be consciously aware that the space is narrow precisely so as to foster this movement. Third, architectural discourse is part of everyday life and is thus experienced inattentively – it does not demand attention in the same manner as other culturally produced phenomena such as art and literature.

In Eco's terms, the denoted function of the metro was to provide transportation service to Moscow's burgeoning population. However, and as others have noted (Rylkin, 2003; Jenks, 2000; Kettering 2000a; Gérin, 2000), the metro's connotative function was at least as important as its strictly denotative one, as it embodied the superlativeness of the discourse of the Soviet 1930s and functioned as a metonym for the future socialist society.³⁴ Elements inside individual metro stations can also be conceptualized to function in



Figure 2: Escalator in Revolution Square Station. From anon., Moskovskii Metropoliten (Moscow, 1953), n.p.

these semiotic terms – such as, for example, the escalator (See Figure 2). On the primary, denoted level, the escalator functions as a means of passing between two levels of space, aboveground and underground. However, in the ideologically charged milieu of the Soviet 1930s, the escalator also functioned on a higher, communicative level. To illustrate, I will use A.V. Morozova's socialist realist poem about the metro, titled "Of the

³⁴ In another context, an interesting analysis of the denotative and connotative functions of the North American mall is given by Goss (1993).

Miracle Staircase”, which was first published anonymously in 1935 in the newspaper *Pravda*, the official publication of the Soviet Communist Party (see Appendix A).³⁵

Upon her arrival in Moscow, the poet exclaims:
I looked for the miracle-staircase,
And when I caught sight of this staircase,
I got frightened and started to flee.
I wanted to run, but people grabbed me:
“No, no, my little old lady, you’ve come to visit us,
So stay and see!”
I only had to step on the staircase,
And it took me down underground in one minute.
Here I grabbed my head.
I said to myself: “Oh, oh,
What do I see in front of me?”
A train station exactly like a palace,
Just like a palace of white stone,
Columns and walls all of marble,
Lampshades like sculptures,
Of frosted glass.
The light is very bright,
And the air is very clean.
I didn’t even think I was underground,
Thirty meters deep.

³⁵ “Of the Miracle Staircase” is an example of a new work of folk tale, or *noviny*, to appear in the Soviet Union amidst the renewed interest in folk culture in the 1930s. Written in the style of a traditional epic song or *byliny*, the poem describes a ride on the Moscow metro and extols Stalin and Kaganovich for having built it (Miller, 1990).

This excerpt from “Of the Miracle Staircase” illustrates the difference between connotation and denotation, exposing the dual nature of Soviet space. The escalator into the metro denotes a method of moving from the surface of the city into the underground station. However, it does not simply function in this utilitarian fashion, as the “miracle staircase” also connotes a passageway between the ordinary and the extraordinary, profane and sacred space, thus relating to issues of symbolic significance to the Soviet



Figure 3: Interior chamber of Sverdlov Square Station.
From anon, *Moskovskii Metropoliten*, (Moscow, 1953), n.p.

state. On the surface of the city the protagonist is fearful; underground she is awestruck. She is not specifically using the escalator in order to catch a train: rather, she is descending in order to see what the world underground has to offer, the escalator connoting a bridge between two orders of space.

Upon completing the subterranean journey into Sverdlov Square station, the

metro passenger is whisked into its central chamber – a self-contained linear vault, which, at regular intervals, contained arched openings on either side to provide access to the trains (See Figure 3). Designed by architect Ivan Fomin, the interior of the station is reminiscent of many of the images in Morozova’s poem: the ceiling of the central vault is

lined by diamond-shaped rhomboids executed in glazed ceramic, whose brilliant surface reflected the yellow light emanating from the ornate wall sconces.³⁶ From this central vantage point visual access to the trains was obscured. This design strategy ensured that a passenger's attention would be captured by the architecture and art in the station – sign-vehicles that heightened the purpose of the metro beyond that of mere commuting, bringing symbolic expression to the cultural values of socialist realism and celebrating



Figure 4: Bench in Sverdlov Square Station. From anon, *Moskovskii Metropoliten*, (Moscow, 1953), n.p.

the glorious socialist future.³⁷ Such a design strategy was purposeful. In the 1930s it was common for Western subway systems, such as the one in New York City, to be designed such that the train occupied the centre of the subway tunnel. As a result, commuters were relegated to the outer platforms of the station and had to climb stairs over the subway train if they needed to travel in the opposite direction. By contrast, the Moscow metro was

designed so that the trains were located in the outer vaults of each metro station,

thereby allowing humans to occupy the central platform and eliminating the need to climb stairs. According to Lazar Kaganovich, the head of *Metrostroi*, the decision to relegate trains to the outer edges of the metro stations was a tangible triumph of humans

³⁶ For a complete rendering of the design imperatives of Sverdlov station, see Kettering (2000b).

³⁷ See also Landzelius' (2001) semiotic reading of the mall. I am indebted to him for many of the ideas in this section.

over the machine, and as such, a brilliant achievement of socialism (Wolf, 1994). In Sverdlov Square station, the design of the central platform effectively suppressed the primary function of the metro station (transportation) and created as much space as possible for the employment of sign-vehicles with a connotative character. The station demonstrates how architectural discourse can be psychologically persuasive – passengers were prompted to follow the “instructions” of the metro station without necessarily being conscious of the underlying design imperatives.

Many of the other design elements in Sverdlov Square station had both denotative and connotative functions. Between each arched opening leading from the central chamber to the train platforms was an expanse of marbled wall flanked by fluted marble columns, between which was located a marble bench (see Figure 4). I would suggest that while benches denoted a place to sit, they simultaneously connoted urban, aboveground spaces of leisure and recreation, which may have been a deliberate reflection of contemporary state values. During the 1930s, official discourse promoted leisure via two channels. First, citizens were exhorted to enjoy the newfound splendours of socialism. Whereas the First Five Year Plan had focused predominantly on production, collectivization, and industrialization, the Second Five Year Plan made minor allowances for the sacrifices of previous years and consequently promoted increased consumerism as well as recreational opportunity.³⁸ Second, during the 1930s leisure, sport, and recreation were widely promoted under the official rubric of *fizkultura*, which emphasized physical activity as a civic duty in order to develop a strong workforce and ready the country for

³⁸ Although consumerism was officially promoted in conjunction with the Second Five Year Plan, it should be noted that food and housing shortages persisted throughout the 1930s, and material scarcity remained a reality for most of the Soviet populace.

military defence.³⁹ Accordingly, the first city-planning initiatives implemented in the 1930s included the preservation of existing green spaces and the introduction of numerous new parks of leisure and recreation. Benches were common in these parks, which often included sports facilities that provided space for the more formal practice of *fizkultura* (O'Mahony, 2006).

To be sure, city officials considered urban green space to be the hallmark of a progressive socialist city – in contrast to the industrial, overcrowded Western city – and a priority of Moscow's first city plan of the Soviet era was the planting of shrubs and trees on city streets and in parks and courtyards (Posokhin, 1974).⁴⁰ I would therefore suggest that the benches in Sverdlov Square station linked the underground space symbolically to this emerging world of leisure aboveground. Indeed, benches are typically placed in pleasurable urban environments – parks, lookout points, and pedestrian avenues – in order to encourage passer-bys to pause, rest, and enjoy themselves. This secondary, connotative function of the benches in Sverdlov Square station is reinforced by the fact that they were situated in the central chamber of the station with limited visual access to the trains, such that their practical value as a place to sit while waiting to catch a train was quite negligible.

Similarly, the metro system itself possessed denotative and connotative functions that linked its form and function to state imperatives. While the metro denoted a system of transportation to be used to move people between their residence and place of employment, O'Mahony (2006) has noted that the first lines of the metro were actually

³⁹ *Fizkultura*, or physical culture, also promoted “modern” bodily practices including, but not limited to, personal hygiene. For a succinct overview of policy relating to sport in the Soviet Union see Riordan (1980).

⁴⁰ Moscow's first Soviet-era plan was instituted in 1935.

confined to the central city and thus of limited use for commuting purposes. The first line of the metro began at Krymskaya Square, near the entrance to Gorkii Park of Culture and Rest, and ended in the northeast at Sokolniki Park of Culture and Rest, and a branch line ran east toward the Moscow River. The second line of the metro similarly linked spaces of culture and rest, beginning at Sverdlov Square in central Moscow and continuing past the Dinamo and Tomskii sports stadia. Furthermore, Wolf (1994) demonstrates that due to construction budget shortfalls, the price of a metro ticket was two to five times higher than a bus or tram ticket, and so was not affordable transportation for the average Muscovite. This lack of affordability coupled with the system's limited usefulness for commuting purposes create an interesting conundrum. I would suggest that although the metro system certainly functioned denotatively – that is, it did transport people underground, notwithstanding its limitations – during the 1930s the system was perhaps more effective at performing the connotative function of promoting the state imperative of *fizkultura* and propagating the wonder of Soviet technological achievement than it was as a system of mass transportation.

Inside the station, architectural enhancements did not necessarily satisfy a denotative function of the kind characterizing the escalator and benches. Decorative elements – such as the neo-classical fluted pillars flanking each arched passageway from the central platform to the train platforms – functioned purely symbolically. The pillars, crafted from sheets of marble quarried in the Urals, connote classical Greek and Roman architecture, design features that are commonly used to signify power and monumentality

in the built environment, and which were re-popularized in the 1930s due to Stalin's classical taste in art and architecture.⁴¹

However, it should be noted that classical taste in architecture and design was not limited to the Soviet Union. For example, the City Beautiful urban planning movement, which utilized neoclassical architecture and emphasized order, dignity, and harmony, was popular in both Western Europe and North America in the latter half of the twentieth century. The City Beautiful movement also influenced later city planning movements such as the Garden City. Further, Fomin's neoclassical style may have served to soften responses to the new form of progress embodied by the metro. In his exploration of Europe's passage to modernity, Schorske (1979) posits that the architectural historicism manifest in much of nineteenth-century European structure was an attempt to clothe utilitarian structures – such as railway stations – in the comforting, recognizable garb of the past, in order to disguise the new and potentially unnerving technology that the architecture housed. McCannon (2007) extends Schorske's observation to the Kazan Railway station in Moscow, completed during the period 1913-40, whose architectural language is a pastiche of classical styles – the



Figure 5: Danko's Bas-Relief Sculpture in Sverdlov Square Station

⁴¹ During the 1930s socialist realism in architecture was articulated by building upon historically progressive design elements from Russian and Western culture. Architecture was not to slavishly recreate styles from the past, but to fuse progressive elements into something altogether Soviet. See Hudson (1994) for an overview of the Stalinization of architecture.

façade replete with decorative Corinthian columns, Roman arches, and wedding cake tiers. To be sure, Sverdlov Square station conformed to this pan-European trend of architectural historicism, and it is possible that the station's design may have been intended to function in a similar manner – to suppress the alien nature of new technology and hearken back to a more understandable past.

Art and Semiotics

Until this point I have attempted to illustrate how the Moscow metro system as a whole – as well as architectural elements inside Sverdlov Square station – functioned both denotatively and connotatively. However, Natalia Danko's folk dance motif did not function in this dual sense; the purpose of her artwork was to connote a state-sanctioned message of Soviet socialism rather than function in a utilitarian fashion. Consequently, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring how the neoclassical style of Sverdlov Square station – to which Danko's folk dance motif conformed – may have influenced a reading of Danko's artwork (Figure 5).

Danko executed her schema of folk dancers for Sverdlov Square station in glazed white porcelain, in keeping with the neoclassical form of the station's architecture. The advantage of using glazed porcelain was that it resembled marble, the material of classical Greek and Roman statuary, but at a much cheaper cost. Much like these Western antecedents of public art, Danko's sculpture featured flawless, idealized forms that denied human imperfection. While the neoclassical architectural and artistic design harmony contributed to an aesthetically pleasing interior, I would suggest that Danko's use of the glazed white material also had the potential to complicate a state-sanctioned

reading of her artwork. As a case in point, glazed porcelain could not render the differences in skin colour that existed in the Southern Central Asian republics, which introduces a tension into the artwork between the (absent) darker skin and the whiteness of the glazed porcelain.⁴²

In Russian and Soviet iconography, whiteness functioned as a signifier of purity and goodness. Early in the twentieth century Kandinsky theorized thus on the properties of the colour white: “White... has this harmony of silence... [i]t is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age” (1977: 39). White was perceived as a colour of “becoming”, a perception that remained unaltered in the early Soviet period. In the Soviet context, Clark (2003) suggests that white and light, due to their mirage-like quality, represented the transition into a higher spatial and social order. Thus, white colouring could symbolize a (sacred) space, as well as an improvement in quality of life. In posters, for example, white curtains on windows and white clothes on workers were signs of being cultured, and by extension, the achievement of socialism. Using literature as an example, Clark (2003:15) writes that “white (and light) are crucial as devices for representing the ‘suddenly’ of that mind-boggling leap from provincial backwardness (often underlined with scenes of muddy roads) to the glittering, modern city.”

Brightness (*svetlost’*) and reflectivity were akin to the colour white in terms of their desirous properties: the two qualities were particularly sought after in the construction of the Moscow metro stations, as such properties were believed to obscure the fact that metro stations were located far underground. In a monograph on the metro published in

⁴² Cox (2003) notes that in the realm of Soviet advertising in the 1930s, characters were almost always exclusively Russian in appearance.

1958, Sverdlov Square station was specifically praised for its brightness and reflectivity, an accolade that was due to the choice of light-coloured marble and glazed porcelain as construction materials.

I would suggest that the use of the white, reflective material of glazed porcelain – a cost-effective replica of marble, the material of Greek and Roman artists – gave aesthetic legitimacy to the non-Russian ethnic minorities of the 1930s Soviet Union while simultaneously erasing the signifier of race – and thus of inferiority. Stalinist art and architecture relied heavily on classical motifs, and the use of Greek and Roman art became signifiers of a high cultural legacy. In the age when the New Socialist Person was being forged, the ideal body – as a representation of the body politic – was often figured in the manner of classical Greek and Roman sculpture (Wunsche, 2000; Clark, 1993). Thus, such sculpture came to aesthetically symbolize the best of (Western) world heritage. In contrast, I would suggest that the body of the coloured minorities – perhaps unconsciously – signified the backwardness that the state wished to eradicate: white and non-white functioned effectively as two sides of a socially constructed binary opposition. Using this line of reasoning, the non-white minorities would not have been an appropriate representation of the



Figure 6: Uzbek Female and Male Dancer. From Meshcheryakov, A. and I. Ostarkova, Moskovskii Metropoliten, (Moscow, 2005), n.p.

glorious socialist future for the interior space of the Moscow metro. Thus, a

tension arises in Danko's work as she attempts to reconcile the classical, idealized body with the coloured body of the ethnic Muslim minorities.

If the sculptural white skin of the folk dancers denied their status as ethnic minorities, so too did their dress and facial features. For example, aside from a slight Asiatic up-turn to the male Uzbek dancer's eyes, there is little in the appearance of the Uzbek dancers' faces that would identify them by their ethnicity. Likewise, while the costume of the Uzbek dancers superficially resembled actual Central Asian attire, key features of their attire appeared to be Europeanized, presumably to render them more legible to Russian viewers (Figure 6). The body of the Uzbek male is clad in a robe, or *khalat* – a traditional brightly patterned ankle-length garment bordered at the neck, hem, and cuffs with knitted silk thread. These details are implied in Danko's rendering through the use of gold accents that replicate the silk border and the pattern in the material. However, instead of completing the Uzbek costume with a pair of leather boots – the typical fashion of Central Asia during the early and mid-1930s – the length of the Uzbek man's *khalat* has been shortened to the knee, and his ensemble instead completed with a pair of pants. Thus, rather than sporting the costume typical for the era, (one to which Danko would have had access through the ethnographic museum in Leningrad), Danko's male Uzbek is outfitted in a two-piece ensemble more characteristic of European attire than traditional Uzbek costume.⁴³ On his head the Uzbek dancer wears a *kalaposh*, an embroidered cap around which a turban – a symbol of Islamic faith – was typically wound. The fact that the turban is absent in Danko's artwork is significant, as it implies that the Uzbek has repudiated his religious belief, and by extension, backwardness and tradition.

⁴³ For a discussion of ethnographic exhibits in museums during the Soviet 1920 and 1930s see Hirsch (2003).

The female Uzbek dancer is dressed in a *khalat* almost identical to her male counterpart: a knee-length robe cinched at the waist, bright decoration implied by the gold accentuation along the neck, hem, and cuffs. However, her attire features less in common with “authentic” Uzbek dress than that of her male counterpart. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, women in traditional Central Asian culture wore drastically different dress indoors and out. Indoors, basic costume consisted of a short-sleeved smock that was tucked into a pair of wide-legged pants, tapering toward the bottom and hanging in folds around the ankles. A cotton jacket would be worn over the entire ensemble. Outdoors she would don the *chavchon* (black horse-hair veil) in order to cover her face, as well as the *farandja* – a grey robe that covered her body from head to toe, with long false sleeves that would be fastened behind the body.

Aside from the significance of the Uzbek women being unveiled, it should also be noted that in Danko’s representation the Uzbek female is not wearing the loose-legged pants that were so typical of the era, but rather a long, flowing skirt characteristic of pan-European fashion in the 1930s (and likely more legible to the Russian viewer).⁴⁴ In rejecting traditional folk dress, Danko seemed to Europeanize the Uzbek dancers, showcasing them in contemporary clothing that would be legible to urban Muscovites. Hence, I would suggest that Danko’s artwork eradicates the visual differences between Russians and ethnic minorities. Coupled with the motif of whiteness as a signifier for progress, these elements complicate and contradict the official reading of Danko’s artwork.

⁴⁴ According to Soviet art historian Tatiana Strizhenova (1991), long dresses with a fitted waist and a full, flared skirt became fashionable in Russia in the mid to late 1930s, following fashion developments in Western European countries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the reader to Sverdlov Square station by weaving semiotics together with the form and function of the Moscow metro system, as well as selected architectural and artistic elements therein. I have shown that architectural elements within Sverdlov Square station performed a utilitarian, denotative function as well as a meaning-laden, connotative function. The latter half of the chapter further explored this process of connotation, which could be interpreted both according to official discourse as well as according to the reality of everyday life in the Soviet 1930s. I argued that although the official function of the Moscow metro was to transport Muscovites to their places of work, the initial metro stations actually connected passengers to urban spaces of leisure and recreation. In regard to Natalia Danko's artwork, the use of glazed, white porcelain was officially meant to connote the grandeur of Greek and Roman statuary. However, I suggested that the use of white porcelain and Europeanized dress undermined the cultural legitimacy of the non-Western ethnic minorities as a valued component of the Soviet Union. The following chapters will explore Danko's folk dance motif in greater thematic detail.

CHAPTER FIVE – Folk Culture

Introduction

In Sverdlov Square station, the figure of each of Danko's folk dancers is superimposed on blank space and confined in a diamond-shaped border, a visual device that effectively separates the dancer from the context of everyday life, instead inserting him or her into an indeterminate time and space. As works of art, Danko's folk dance motif does not perform a strictly denotative function. However, as connotative signs – that is, vehicles that communicate meaning, the dancers “perform” in multiple ways that resonate with the discourse and experiences of life in the 1930s. Chapter 5 focuses on the thematic content of Danko's artwork. In this chapter I argue that the theme of joy in everyday life and the affirmation of folk culture are the intended interpretations of the folk dancers, themes that dovetail with those promulgated by other forms of official discourse such as speeches made by Party members and the Stalin Constitution (1936). However, not all viewers during the 1930s necessarily possessed a full knowledge of official discourse. Moreover, the official discourse often openly contradicted life experience, resulting in a fissure between the official aims of Danko's artwork and its reception by the wider population. This chapter goes on to explore this gap, a space open to a variety of unexpected and potentially undesired meanings.

Reading the “Folk”: the official lens

According to architect Ivan Fomin, the artistic purpose of Sverdlov Square station was to “express the grand joy of the emancipation of art for all the peoples of our country” (Kravets, 1941). The theme chosen to express this imperative was that of folk dance, a form of popular culture that had only recently entered the sphere of official

sanction. The Soviet Union experienced a boom in folk dance during the 1930s, and it was not alone in doing so. In the pan-European context, folk dance gained wildly in popularity during this decade,⁴⁵ reaching a pinnacle in 1935 at the London International Festival of National [Folk] Dance. Indeed, London's festival played an important role in generating Soviet interest in the genre, which had hitherto been largely neglected in favour of classical ballet.⁴⁶

In 1936 Moscow mirrored London's Folk festival with one of its own: the All-Union Festival of Folk Dancers. In 1937, the year before the opening of Sverdlov station, dance companies in Moscow began to stage productions that coincided with the tendencies of the epoch; in that year, "Dances of the Soviet Peoples" appeared on the popular outdoor stage of Gorky Park of Culture and Rest, followed two months later by a production prepared by Igor Moiseyev and what would later become his famous Theatre of Folk Art (Souritz, 1994). In addition to these examples of cultural performance, throughout the latter half of the 1930s the various folk arts became increasingly participatory and accessible to the average citizen. Amateur folk dance groups, choirs, and musical ensembles were sponsored by the state and made frequent pilgrimages to Moscow in order to perform at Moiseyev's theatre. Further, ethnographic organizations, the intelligentsia, and students were commissioned to collect and document examples of

⁴⁵ See Heck (1999) p. 115, note 7.

⁴⁶ Ballet was an art to which the Russians were strongly attracted. For an overview of ballet in Russian and Soviet culture, see Swift (1968). A Soviet dance contingent was hastily assembled to represent the nation at the London International Festival of National Dance, including in its ranks the Uzbek dancer Tamara Khanum, who would go on to take first prize honours at the festival.

folklore from their surrounding region (Oinas, 1974). By the end of the decade, both folk dance and folk culture in general had become thoroughly entrenched in Soviet culture.⁴⁷

The folk phenomenon was part of a wider return to traditional and pre-revolutionary culture that occurred in the mid-1930s, a decade that witnessed the rehabilitation of many cultural practices that had been eschewed during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period and First Five Year Plan. This shift roughly occurred in 1934, when, at the Seventeenth Party Congress, Stalin declared that the building of socialism was complete: class enemies had been eliminated, and the dictatorship of the proletariat could thus be relaxed. Henceforth, it was deemed appropriate to rehabilitate certain elements of pre-revolutionary customs if – and only if – they suited the regime’s overall goals and generated support for the Soviet project.⁴⁸ At the same time, the relaxation of certain social and economic policies was more generally undertaken. In the rural context, the forced collectivization of agriculture was abandoned, and measures to promote social stability and increase economic productivity were pursued by providing workers with material incentives and allowing a limited market for collective farm produce. The relatively moderate line adopted by the party is succinctly summed up by Getty (1991: 33), who states that “[a]lthough the sword of the proletarian dictatorship was not to be beaten into ploughshares, it [was] at least... sheathed.”

⁴⁷ Beginning in 1934-5, folklore materials were published in newspapers and magazines, folklore clubs were founded on collective farms and in factories, and folklore began to be taught in schools and universities (Oinas, 1961).

⁴⁸ For example, Petrone (2000: 85-7) demonstrates that the rehabilitation of the fir tree in 1935 as a symbol of celebration, after it had been disallowed as a vestige of bourgeois culture in 1928, was a “pragmatic decision to promote an already established urban tradition throughout the entire Soviet Union to fill a void in the Soviet holiday calendar and mobilize support for the Soviet state.” On folklorism (politicized folk adaptation) in general, see Stites (1992), pages 78-81.

This relaxation in Soviet policy meant that certain aspects of traditional peasant culture, such as folk dance, could be safely revived if they complied with state-mandated cultural imperatives. In the 1930s, the study of folklore and folk culture was deemed to be “close to the hearts of the masses,” and was thus conceived to be of great propagandistic value (Oinas, 1961: 366). Moreover, folk culture in general fit neatly into the optimistic and life-affirming mold of socialist realism that pervaded the 1930s. In the words of the folk dance choreographer Igor Moiseyev:

Folk art, whatever its form, is always on the side of good, always wholesome and optimistic. In folk-lore we find the vices denounced and held up to ridicule while praises are sung to man’s [sic] better interests. Folk art, the art of the people, is a splendid means of educating the masses, for it can speak their own language, simple, colourful, and replete with wisdom (quoted in Chudnovski, 1959: 23).

As propounded by the proletarian writer Maxim Gorky, folklore had high artistic value, and its manifestation in socialist realist art should stress both its optimism and its tangible connection to the life and working conditions of the people.

Danko’s finely executed folk dancers would be immediately apparent to anyone who descended the “miracle staircase” into Sverdlov Square station. I believe that several features of the ensemble are quite significant when analyzed from the point of view of official discourse. To begin, I would suggest that Danko’s series of undifferentiated dancers is imbued with the collective ethos of the early to mid-1930s. The dancers are arranged on either side of the central vault in an undifferentiated parallel formation. What is evident in their formation is the idea of order – the sculptures are uniformly aligned, standardized and easily categorized as “folk dancers.” Just as real-life folk dance ensembles emphasized the corps rather than individual dancers, so too did Danko’s folk dance motif emphasize the collective body politic rather than individualized

dancers.⁴⁹ This order, regularity and lack of hierarchy in the ensemble connotes a reading of equality similar to that propagated in other sources of official discourse. Soviet socialism, particularly in the 1920s, heavily emphasized the collective over the achievements of any one individual. Indeed, collective work brigades – commonly called “shock brigades” – were widely utilized to achieve ambitious production agendas. These types of brigades worked tirelessly not only to construct the metro itself, but also to realize many of the murals and large-scale works of art that decorated its interior. Although the emphasis on the collective changed somewhat in the 1930s with the onset of the Stakhanovite movement and other forms of personal recognition and award, equality between the genders and the nationalities continued to be emphasized in speeches and publications throughout the 1930s.⁵⁰

This equality was further entrenched in official discourse with the passing of the *Stalin Constitution* in the mid-1930s. In February of 1935, the Seventh Congress of Soviets and the party’s Central Committee announced the need to revise the constitution of 1924 due to the dramatic changes that had since taken place in Soviet society. Because capitalism had been defeated, the legal and political system had to be brought into line with the new socialist society. The announcement of a revised constitution promising civil and democratic rights was consistent with the more moderate stance the party had struck in the realm of economics and culture. The folk dance motif also coincided with

⁴⁹To some extent, Danko’s emphasis on the collective is a slight departure from the general trend of the late 1930s. By this period, egalitarianism – as propagated in mass culture and imagery during the First Five Year Plan – was giving way to social stratification and an emphasis on individual heroes in the realms of sport, aviation, and production. In addition, in popular imagery the Russian republic was by this time increasingly identified as the “first among equals” – a distinction wholly absent from Danko’s artwork.

⁵⁰ The Stakhanovite movement was a form of socialist competition that emerged during the second Five Year Plan in 1935. The Stakhanovite movement was named after Alexei Stakhanov, a coal miner who exceeded his quota by fourteen times and consequently became a national hero.

the official slogan of the Soviet 1930s that “Life is getting better, comrades, life is becoming more joyous.”⁵¹ As Karen Kettering (2000b) points out, the fact that the dancing figures in Sverdlov Square were titled “The Daily Life of the Peoples of the U.S.S.R.” is significant because it implied that daily life in the 1930s was “so joyful, spontaneous, and harmonious that it could be represented as a dance” (p. 41). The gazes, facial expressions, and dress of the dancers signify that everyday life is the subject of Danko’s motif. They do not appear to be on stage or performing – rather than returning the gaze of the viewer with a smile, as one would expect of a stage performer, the faces of Danko’s dancers are set in

expressions of absorption and placid concentration, with their gaze cast in their partner’s direction as though anticipating his or her next move. The exception is the Kazakh male, whose gaze is fixed on the passing metro passengers, and whose features are arranged in an expression of outright



Figure 7: Kazakh Male and Female Dancer.
From Meshcheryakov, A. and I. Ostarkova,
Moskovskii Metropoliten, (Moscow, 2005), n.p.

joviality, as though his joy simply cannot be suppressed (Figure 7). This positive emotive expression affirms one of the central tenets of socialist realism – *zhizneradost'*, joy in life.

Similarly, the costume of the dancers connotes everyday life. Their dress is not ostentatious – the ensemble is dressed in simple flowing materials that contribute to the illusion that their dancing is borne of spontaneous expression. One of the socialist realist

⁵¹ Stalin made this proclamation in November of 1935, after which it became a popular media slogan.

tropes of the 1930s was for artists to depict figures in motion, as an active stance signified “becoming,” rather than merely “being,” thus implying the dynamic movement of bodies into the glorious socialist future.⁵² This feature is present in Danko’s work, which visually implies movement through the dynamism of the dancer’s costuming. For example, the Georgian woman’s costume and headdress is fanning out behind her, with the material clinging tightly to her body in the front and the excess folds of fabric whirling about beside her (Figure 8). The joy and movement depicted in the folk dance motif in Sverdlov Square station thus broadly complied with the aesthetic imperative of socialist realism, as well as a more general state acceptance and mobilization of pre-Revolutionary and folk traditions. Folk culture in this context is not an

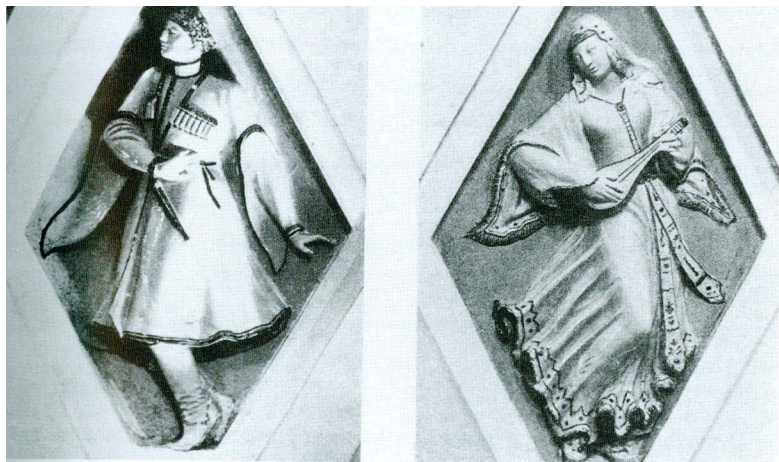


Figure 8: Georgian Male and Female Dancer. From Kravets, S.M. et al, *Arkhitektura moskovskogo metropolitena, vtoraia ochered'*, (Moscow 1941) p. 123 reproduced in Kettering, 2000, p. 41.

arbitrary signifier, as folk ensembles in the Soviet 1930s helped construct and articulate nationhood, as well as provide a medium for the peaceful and acceptable expression of national identity.

The youthfulness of the dancer’s faces and physique was also in keeping with the official policy of *fizkultura*, which consistently used youthful bodies to express its

⁵² See Clark (1993). A static composition defied the precepts of socialist realism as they applied to art and architecture. For example, the bronze statue installation in Revolution Square station was lauded by critics for its verisimilitude, but criticized for being overly inert and not expressing movement into the joyous socialist future.

ideals.⁵³ The emphasis on youthfulness was particularly marked in regard to the representation of peasant women. Posters and films from this era portrayed the life of a *kolkhoznitsa* – a collective farm woman – as young, slim, and brimming with optimism. This new, youthful representation of peasant women was in stark contrast to how rural women had been represented in the previous decade: buxom and matronly, and as one of the most backward elements of society (Bonnell, 1997; Waters, 1991). The imagery of the 1920s changed subsequent to rural collectivization, at which time Naiman (1997: 290) asserts that the emerging “theme of rural abundance demanded that women be reconfigured and enlisted as ideological symbols of kolkhoz fecundity,” rather than as regressive elements in society.

In a commentary on her work in Sverdlov Square station, Danko affirms the deployment of the pervasive themes of the 1930s:⁵⁴

Our present day existence offers the artist many joyful themes. But for me, having witnessed the oppression of the nationalities policy of the Tsarist regime, the subject of the development of culture of the peoples of our Union appears all the more important. Equality and brotherly [sic] union of the nationalities of all the USSR gave rise to the flowering of the art of the people, their music, songs, and dances. I wanted to represent this theme in the festive material of porcelain (Danko, 1938: 82).

Moreover, she invokes another common practice of socialist realism – the contrast between the oppressive, pre-Soviet past and the wonders of the present/future. An “accurate” reading of the folk dancers in Sverdlov Square station would necessarily entail the understanding and deployment of the officially sanctioned tropes of the 1930s – the

⁵³ *Fizkultura* in the 1930s was directly linked to the ritual of public performance that occurred during Physical Culture parades on Red Square. For an incisive analysis of the meaning(s) of these parades in the context of the 1930s, see Petrone (2000).

⁵⁴ Danko’s attempt to reflect the state’s new attitude toward “the folk” is understandable given the circumstances under which artists worked in the Soviet 1930s. While I do not wish to imply that artistic license was completely disallowed, the fact remains that artists relied on the state for all of the essentials – contracts, supplies and pay – and it was thus in their best interest to conform to Party policy. Further, and more importantly, artists risked losing their freedom or even their lives if they strayed too far from the authorities’ dictates.

eneration of folk culture, the slogan that “life is becoming more joyous,” the particularized iconography of socialist realism in visual art, as well as the equality affirmed in the Stalin Constitution and practiced, in part, through collective work.

However, access to such dominant codes is not a foregone conclusion; codes must be learned, and their knowledge is not distributed evenly within any given group (Bal and Bryson, 1991). In Kettering’s (2000b) analysis of Sverdlov Square station, she explores the meaning of Danko’s art according to official Soviet ideology, relying on the Stalin Constitution as the main context from which to read the folk dance motif. But I would suggest that we could add another dimension to our understanding by taking into account the fact that such context can, in itself, be quite unstable and prone to misunderstanding. Davies (1997b) notes that for many citizens the Stalin constitution served mainly to magnify the gap between the real and the imagined. Western scholars who have studied public opinion in Stalinist Russia (Davies, 1997a, 1997b; Getty, 1991) have shown that the public’s reaction to the Constitution was often confused and incomplete. For example, Getty (1991:25) notes that “[q]uite a few [people] thought the new constitution meant a return to private property, that peasants would ‘live as before’ or that kulaks would return to claim their farms” – policies which were never alluded to in the actual document.

Although the Party deployed considerable resources to ensure that millions of Soviet citizens met to discuss and debate the constitution prior to its ratification, it is telling that such glaring inaccuracies in interpretation persisted. Hence, an official reading of the folk dancers – that is, one in line with official discourse – should not be assumed based on the context of the Stalin Constitution. Indeed, Bal and Bryson (1991:

150) state: “It is the consequence of the fact that the... artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in which... the viewer views the image, and that nothing the work of art is able to do can fix in advance any of its encounters with contextual plurality.” In viewing the troupe of folk dancers emblazoned on the walls of Sverdlov Square station, a metro passenger – either knowingly or unknowingly – would encounter some of the major Stalinist tropes of the 1930s. However, in the “quicksand society” (Lewin, 1985) of Moscow in the 1930s – the shifting imperatives of socialist realist art together with the influx of new inhabitants fresh from the country – it can be assumed that different individuals, according to their own experience, possessed different codes for viewing and understanding Danko’s folk dance motif.

The fragmentation of official discourse

The state-sanctioned meaning of Danko’s artwork had the potential to fragment along numerous fault lines. For some viewers the image of the folk dancer as peasant/collective farmer may have been the primary signifier – the image of a folk dancer thereby functioning as a symbol for rural life. The question we must ask, then, is what could rural life connote to a Soviet viewer of the 1930s aside from, or in addition to, the happiness of daily life in the U.S.S.R.?

The folk motif in Soviet art emerged during an era of antipathy toward actual rural life. In terms of official discourse, the Stalin Constitution – which paid lip service to equality in other respects – curiously did not allow for parity between (urban) workers and (rural) collective farmers. The constitution favoured workers over farmers on a number of points – the former were allotted both greater rights to holidays and the ability

to work a seven-hour day – privileges that were not awarded to their rural counterparts (Davies, 1997b).⁵⁵ To be sure, the power imbalance between urban elites and rural peasants preceded the Stalin era; for example, Lenin regarded peasants as the most backward segment of society. However, until the onset of the First Five Year Plan and Stalin's drive to collectivize the countryside, life in the 1920s had remained largely unchanged for the bulk of the rural population. Collectivization wreaked havoc upon the countryside and the traditional peasant way of life; animals and private property were confiscated, prosperous (or seemingly prosperous) peasants were deported to labour camps in Siberia, and thousands of people died due to food shortages (Viola, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1994).

This last point should be underscored, because it brings into relief the disparity between the real and the imagined in the Stalinist 1930s. The appreciation of folk culture and emergence of rural nostalgia followed on the heels of a complete agrarian crisis in the Soviet Union as a whole and particularly in areas such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Indeed, in her analysis of political posters from the early 1930s, Bonnell (1997) suggests that positive images of the peasantry emerged at precisely the same time as the rural crisis, despite the fact that the country was undergoing rapid industrialization – or perhaps because this was the case.⁵⁶

Bonnell (1997) further argues that positive images of the peasantry were propagated particularly in regard to women. Soviet scholars have clearly documented that resistance to rural collectivization was strongest among rural women (Engel, 2004;

⁵⁵ This disparity in rights did not go unnoticed by collective farmers, whose dissatisfaction was voiced in opinion reports and letters to the State.

⁵⁶ The idealization of rural life by visual artists as a response to industrialization and/or modernization is a phenomenon that has been noted in a variety of cases. In regard to Germany, see Bausinger (1990), for Italy, Ortiz (1999), and the Netherlands, Beckett (2001).

Viola, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1994, Viola, 1986). Fitzpatrick (1994) posits that the disproportionate participation of women in demonstrations against collectivization occurred because women were less likely to provoke retaliation by Soviet authorities. Fitzpatrick (1994: 66) also writes that old women were able to take the greatest liberties in their demonstration, and cites an example of a 70 year old woman who disrupted a meeting by dancing and singing anti-kolkhoz songs. To the Soviet authorities, resistance among women – and particularly old women – was a signifier of their backwardness, and attempts were made to eradicate this backwardness through art and the popular media.

Resistance to collectivization among peasant men often took the form of flight; millions of Russian peasants fled their kolkhoz during the early 1930s for employment opportunities in the city. However, a mass exodus from the countryside did not occur nationwide; Ukrainians, to cite just one example, were barred from buying train tickets or leaving their republic, and were thus left to face the destruction of their livelihoods without outside support.⁵⁷ Danko's image of contented folk dancers obscures the havoc wreaked by collectivization as well as this regional disparity. Because many Muscovites were recent emigrants from the country, their negative experience of rural collectivization would be brought to bear on their reading of Danko's folk imagery, thus adding a dimension of polysemy to her art that would complicate the wholesale positive reading of joyous folk dancers/collective farmers. The irony of folk life being represented as a state-sanctioned signifier of joy and equality would not be lost on someone whose life

⁵⁷ On peasant resistance to rural collectivization in Russia, see Viola (1996). Although information relating to the Ukrainian famine was strictly controlled through state news sources, information about the rural devastation would have nonetheless reached Moscow through personal accounts of the trauma, as well as émigré publications. In a diary entry written in 1933, Soviet youth Nina Lugovskaya recounts highly detailed news about the famine in Ukraine, information that was presumably sourced from a publication such as the Menshevik Socialist Herald (Editorial note in Lugovskaya, 2006: 56).

experience recalled the loss of family, property, and tradition that accompanied state-sanctioned collectivization. Thus, on a connotative level, a reading of Danko's dancers had the potential to deploy meaning(s) far broader than what the artist had initially intended.

Rather than a symbol of rural life, for some viewers the image of a dancer may have been the primary signifier of Danko's subterranean artwork – the dancer functioning as an iconic sign. The question we must ask, then, is how could a dancer have been read by a Soviet viewer of the 1930s in addition to the life-affirming reading of folk culture? I would suggest that the central fault line is that the dancer connotes the emerging culture of privilege of the Soviet 1930s.

In contrast to the asceticism of the First Five Year Plan, which channelled State and citizen's energy into achieving the dual goals of collectivization and industrialization, the thaw of the Second Five Year Plan emphasized the individual attainment of consumer goods and services as a sign of personal reward and success. The urban environment of the mid-1930s reflected this shift; by the middle of the decade the streets of Moscow were flooded with more than the typical didactic poster campaign, but also played host to the newfound stimulus of commercial display. In a series of articles written for the London *Times* in 1936, British travel writer Robert Byron attests to the cornucopia of goods that had recently appeared in Moscow and other urban centres.

Today, in all towns, the main streets are lined with glittering displays; the purchasers, who formerly took what they were given or went without, now fuss and discriminate; while the salesmen have lost their take-it-or-leave-it attitude and are officially exhorted to study the public taste.

However, despite the new emphasis on consumerism, scarcity remained a fact of life for most ordinary citizens – only the upper echelons of the Party and intelligentsia

had access to most consumer goods. In an otherwise rosy account of Soviet life in the 1930s, the leftist German-Jewish intellectual Lion Feuchtwanger admits with some consternation in his travel account to Moscow that:

Savants, writers, artists, and actors enjoy definite advantages in the Soviet Union. They are appreciated, encouraged, and even pampered by the State, both with prestige and large incomes. All the means they require are placed at their disposal, and not one of them need suffer any anxiety as to whether what he [sic] is doing will pay (1937: 60).

In the Soviet context, the term *intelligentsia* was an umbrella term employed to describe Soviet elites as a whole – communist officials and academics as well as cultural producers and performers. Social hierarchy was conceptualized in cultural terms; the *intelligentsia* was privileged not because it was a ruling class or elite status group, but because it was the most cultured, advanced group in a backward⁵⁸ society – the cultural vanguard (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 105).⁵⁹

While artistic and scientific titles had emerged in the 1920s, it was not until the Stalin era that the cultural sphere acquired a wide range of titles and honours that reflected the regime's commitment to high culture. The awards had considerable status value – after receiving one the honouree had to be referred to by title or rank on all public occasions. They were also of practical value, as recipients might expect a pension, monthly cash payments, tax exemptions, and reduction in apartment rent (Fitzpatrick,

⁵⁸ Fitzpatrick (1999: 15) defines “backwardness” as everything that belonged to old Russia and needed to be changed in the name of progress and culture.

⁵⁹ Soviet privilege was established at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, which combined conspicuous deference to high culture with an implicit reminder to intellectuals of their obligation to serve the Soviet cause (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 96). Privilege was linked to intellectual acumen – first among the *intelligentsia* were engineers, after which came the “creative *intelligentsia*” such as writers, composers, architects, painters, dancers, etc. The privileges enjoyed by the *intelligentsia* were highly publicized, a strategy that Fitzpatrick (1999) notes may have been an attempt to deflect attention away from the privileges likewise enjoyed by upper members of the communist party. Whatever the case, it did imprint on popular imagination the notion that some members of the creative *intelligentsia* were among the most privileged citizens in the Soviet Union.

1999). Dancers – both classical and folk – were not exempt from this privilege.⁶⁰

Indeed, to cite one example, after a festival of Uzbek culture was celebrated in Moscow in 1937, thirteen Uzbek performers received the Orders of the Labour Red Banner and twenty-five received Orders of the Sign of Honour, honours which conveyed high status and monetary value (Fitzpatrick, 1999). The elevated status of a dancer as a member of the cultural vanguard thus complicates a straightforward correspondence of Danko's dance troupe as a signifier of equality and the idyllic nature of folk culture.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how Soviet citizens may have understood Danko's artwork in Sverdlov Square station according to the theme of folk culture and the joy of everyday life. While the folk dance motif might visually affirm equality and the joy of everyday life according to official discourse, operating in a semiotic fashion Danko's art simultaneously invites contrasting interpretations. The portrayal of peasant life as equal and joyful collides with key policies of the 1930s, such as the social stratification and cultural privilege that occurred in conjunction with the second Five Year Plan and the collectivization of agriculture and consequent destruction of rural culture and values. Folk culture was reinvented and rehabilitated only five years after rural collectivization, and less than two years after the inauguration of the Stalin Constitution. At this time the memories of recent injustices would have been fresh in the minds of the peasant community, who, by 1938, made up the majority of Moscow residents (Hoffman, 1994).

⁶⁰ Swift (1968) recounts that a similar system of privilege had existed in pre-Soviet times. After a period of service, an artist could have a benefit performance at which she was allowed to keep a portion of the ticket sales, and was given jewels, lace, and other gifts from admirers including the royal family. As a result of such gifts, plus salary, some ballerinas were considered to be among the richest people in tsarist Russia.

CHAPTER SIX – Gender and the Nationalities

Introduction

In this chapter I continue to unpack the thematic content of Natalia Danko's artwork in Sverdlov Square station. Chapter 6 roughly follows the same pattern of analysis as Chapter 5, but focuses instead on the official discourse of "the friendship of the peoples" and how it is bound up with the themes of gender and ethnicity. In this chapter I argue that equality is a large component of the intended reading of the folk dancers. The chapter will first discuss this official discourse, then go on to explore the gap between representation and reality in the Soviet 1930s, particularly as it relates to the pair of Uzbek dancers.

Reading gender & ethnicity: the official lens

Equality between the nationalities of the Soviet Union was a recurring theme in the official discourse of the Soviet 1930s, an era which officially trumpeted the end of Russian imperialism and heralded the implicit rights of non-Russian minorities. Indeed, in its initial formulation at the First Soviet Writer's Congress in 1934, socialist realism affirmed its tolerance of what Slezkine (2000) calls "ethnic particularism" by avowing that art should be national in form and socialist in content. Visually, this ethnic/cultural tolerance was commonly expressed by a motif known as the "friendship of the people," signified by a series of male-female pairs from all of the official republics of the Soviet Union (Kettering, 2000b).⁶¹ This visual representation, employed by Danko in Sverdlov Square station, could also be seen in political posters of the era as well as in genres of cultural performance such as parades and physical culture displays (see Petrone, 2000).

In Sverdlov Square station, each republican pair is aligned with one another, thus forming a dyad that symbolizes this “friendship” and the bonds of unity between the parts of the whole.

Kettering (2000b) argues that the artwork in Sverdlov Square station dovetails squarely with the discourse of the Stalin Constitution. In her reading, the inauguration of the constitution in 1936 played an essential role in the affirmation of traditional culture in the non-Russian republics, as it emphasized the inalienable rights of minorities:

Equal rights for citizens of the USSR, irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life, shall be an irrevocable law. Any direct or indirect limitation of these rights, or, conversely, any establishment of direct or indirect privileges for citizens on account of their race or nationality, as well as any propagation of racial or national exclusiveness or hatred or contempt, shall be punished by law.⁶²

The Stalin Constitution affirmed that a harmonious society of equal citizens had been created in the Soviet Union, a viewpoint equally stressed in other sources of official discourse. In his speech delivered to collective farmers in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 1935, Stalin affirmed that “...the friendship between the peoples of our great country is growing stronger... when the great proletarian revolution began in our country, when we overthrew the tsar, the landlords and capitalists, the great Lenin, our teacher, father and tutor, said that henceforth there shall be neither dominant nor subjugated peoples, that the peoples must be equal and free” (Strong: 33-34). Shestakov’s (1938) *A Short History of the USSR*, a formative history textbook used in grade-school classes, reiterates that “the U.S.S.R. is a voluntary and friendly federation of equal nationalities enjoying equal rights.” The author goes on to affirm the gravity of this declaration with a comment from Stalin that “...this friendship is a great thing: as long as it continues the peoples of our

⁶² From the Constitution (Basic Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as reprinted in Strong, *The New Soviet Constitution*, 1936, p. 154.

country will be free and invincible''' (p. 251). An officially sanctioned reading of Danko's artwork, then, would interpret the republican pairs of Danko's folk dance imagery as a symbol of harmony and equal rights among the various nationalities of the Soviet Union.

The discourse of gender equality also factored heavily into the official rhetoric of the 1930s, and was frequently extolled in speeches made by the Party elite. In a typical speech delivered to women collective farm workers in 1935, Stalin stated that:

Only the collective farm life could have made labour a thing of honour, it alone could have bred genuine heroines in the countryside. Only the collective farm life could have destroyed inequality and put woman on her feet... [She] works primarily for herself. And that is just what is meant by the emancipation of peasant women; that is just what is meant by the collective farm system which makes the working woman the equal of every working man (1936:38).

The discourses of national and gender equality were often interwoven in the rhetoric of the Soviet 1930s, as the Soviet government considered both women and ethnic minorities to be among the most "backward" elements of society. For example, Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya emphasized gender equality in her many speeches given throughout the 1930s, most of which were laudatory accounts of women's achievements and frequently focused specifically on minority women (see Krupskaya, 1937). In one of her typical speeches of the 1930s, Krupskaya touches on both the trope of women's emancipation as well as the friendship of the people:

The socialist revolution awakened not only the Russian working women, but also the women of the national minorities, among whom the survivals of old were still more deeply ingrained [...] Republics that were formerly backward economically are now among the most advanced. All this has ensured the complete emancipation of the women of the national minorities. Only a blind man can fail to see the friendship among the various peoples of our union growing and becoming stronger; their trust in the Communist Party and their love of and faith in Comrade Stalin, its leader, a true pupil of Lenin, unite them all (1937: 18).

In addition, the Stalin Constitution affirmed gender equality in Article 122, which stated that “Women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social, and political life.”⁶³ Visually, I would suggest that Danko expresses the official discourse of gender equality through the linear alignment of the bodies of the dancers, which are undifferentiated in terms of gender – both costume and lexicon of movement are interchangeable for either sex.⁶⁴ Such a reading is in keeping with Danko’s *oeuvre*, which regularly featured positive images of women in gender atypical roles – which in this case, would include ethnic minority women being present as dancers in the public sphere.⁶⁵

Fragmentation of Official Discourse

Kettering (2000b: 40) concluded her article on Sverdlov Square station with the missive that “[by] using simplified figures in ‘native dress’ [to represent] an entire ethnicity in her designs for Sverdlov Square, Danko... visually reaffirmed that the various Soviet nationalities would be able to retain their unique cultural identities.” To be sure, this statement helps explain the official imperative behind Danko’s artwork. However, it may also be fruitful to consider how Danko’s work could have been interpreted according to the everyday life of the Soviet 1930s. As I suggested in the previous chapter, it cannot be taken for granted that all metro passengers possessed the knowledge of official discourse that would be needed in order to form a state-sanctioned

⁶³ From the Constitution (Basic Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as reprinted in Strong, *The New Soviet Constitution*, 1936, p. 153.

⁶⁴ The absence of gender differentiation was not usually found in real-life folk dance ensembles. Doi (2002) notes that movement lexicons of male and female Uzbek dancers often demonstrated the ideals of gendered difference in action, whereby men would dance energetically and aggressively and women would engage in more passive movements. See also Shay (2002, 1999).

⁶⁵ For example, a set of porcelain figurines Danko created in the mid-1930s entitled *Reading of a Draft Constitution in Uzbekistan* shows unveiled women reading and studying. See Kettering (1998).

reading of Danko's folk dancers. If the image of Danko's dancers functioned primarily as a signifier of ethnic and gender equality, our task, then, is to explore what meanings could have been connoted in addition to the "friendship of the peoples".

It should be noted first and foremost that Soviet policy toward the nationalities was, in itself, highly complex.⁶⁶ According to Marxist ideology, states and national allegiances would wither away with the destruction of classes and private property. However, Soviet authorities believed that in order to gain the support of the national minorities, people should first be allowed to express their national beliefs and culture. This policy was known as *korenizatsiia*, roughly translated as nativization. What complicated the policy of *korenizatsiia* was that Soviet authorities simultaneously encouraged the creation of a modern, cultured "New Soviet Person" who would eschew backward traditions and ascribe to Soviet notions of modernization such as literacy, secularization, universal education and an appreciation of high culture (Hoffman, 2003; Martin, 2000).

In relation to the rhetoric of "the friendship of the peoples", I would suggest that the Soviet emphasis on high culture as a vehicle to modernize the national minorities complicates the reading of equality in Danko's schema of folk dancers. Despite the speeches and Party rhetoric that affirmed that art should be national in form and socialist in content, in practice folk or national art had to be injected with some form of high (Western) culture in order for it to be a legitimate form of art. In dance, this meant that ballet technique was used to train both folk and classical dancers, and folk dance troupes heavily borrowed from the movement lexicon of ballet. Indeed, ballet schools had been established in all of the republics before folk dance enjoyed its state-sanctioned

⁶⁶ For more detailed information on Soviet nationalities policy see Martin (2000) and Slezkine (1994).

popularity during the 1930s,⁶⁷ and even when folk dance institutes were formed in the republics, Russians were often sent to help the natives there create “authentic” dances (Shay, 2002).⁶⁸

The Uzbek cultural festival held in Moscow in 1937 serves as a good example of the clash between the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* and its simultaneous emphasis on modernization and high culture. The festival was meant to showcase the positive developments that had occurred in the Central Asian republic under socialism. However, performances in the national traditions would not satisfy this imperative; although the representation of the noble soul of the people could be achieved through folk dance, for the festival in Moscow it was deemed necessary to demonstrate cultural achievement through the use of classical opera and ballet (Shay, 1999; Souritz, 1994: 76). Further, in the republics, attending the opera and ballet was part of the cultural capital of the elite (Adams, 2005). Thus, on the one hand, the representation of folk dance in Sverdlov Square station affirmed the importance of folk culture for the Soviet nationalities. However, it simultaneously obscured the precedent Soviet authorities placed on Europeanized forms of high culture, thus producing a fissure between official discourse and everyday reality.

⁶⁷ Although both folk dance and ballet institutes existed in all of the republics by the late 1930s, it was common to assign Russian children to ballet classes only, while the native children were enrolled in both folk and ballet classes. At the end of their training, native dancers were assigned to folk dance companies within their own republic, whereas Russians were generally sent to regional or national ballet companies. Only the most talented native dancer would be able to make a career as a classical ballet dancer (Shay, 2002; Doi, 2001).

⁶⁸ Similar developments occurred in the genre of folk music. In the first folk orchestras set up in the 1920s, instruments were assembled which had never before played together. Musical ensembles were organized according to their European classical counterparts – complete with an approximate wind, string, and percussion section. For the first time, musicians were made to play specific parts under the guidance of a conductor, thus suppressing the improvisatory instinct that had formerly characterized folk music (Nercessian, 2000). Further, Bell (1999) and Richardson (1989) point out that during the Soviet period the bulk of the reconfiguration of urban space in Tashkent occurred along modern, Soviet lines, and pre-Revolutionary cultural traditions of Muslim Central Asia were merely referenced on the building facades. As such, Central Asian identity in urban space was both institutionalized and suppressed.

In addition to affirming the traditional culture of the national republics, I would suggest that Danko used the theme of folk dance to represent the bonds of unity between the parts of the Soviet Union as a whole. However, Danko's installation is atypical for the era in that her representation of the "friendship of the peoples" included only the Russian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, Uzbek and Kazakh nationalities and excluded four smaller republics, the Azerbaidjan SSR in the Caucasus, and the Turkmen, Tajik, and Kirghiz SSRs of Central Asia.⁶⁹ While this overt



Figure 9: Armenian Male and Female Dancer.
From Meshcheryakov, A. and I. Ostarkova,
Moskovskii Metropoliten, (Moscow, 2005), n.p.

omission was probably the most noticeable for contemporary viewers, it was not the only such exclusion; the Soviet Union in the 1930s spanned an immense amount of territory and was comprised of dozens of ethnic minorities which, because they did not inhabit their own republic, were almost always excluded from official forms of representation. However, as noted elsewhere, (Gough and Morgan, 2004; Shay, 1999) anything designed to promote inclusion also simultaneously advances exclusion.

The representation of some ethnicities at the expense of others introduces a measure of hierarchy into Sverdlov Square station that undermines the putative message of equality that the station sought to project. As Shay (1999) asserts, the representation of certain groups at the expense of others implicitly suggests that these groups represent

⁶⁹ This omission was commented on with some consternation in the art criticism magazine *Iskusstvo*. See Sosfenov (1938).

the nation “properly,” and others, by extension, do not.⁷⁰ Certainly, Danko’s folk dance motif and the “friendship of the peoples” trope upon which it drew were rooted in an essentialist portrayal of ethnicity, in which difference was disallowed in favour of unabashed optimism.⁷¹ Essentialism was a convenient and necessary means for Danko to represent “The People.” The dozens of slender, traditionally-clad bodies lining the station’s vault were made to stand for the unity of millions who, in turn, could be reduced to a single individual that was representative of the collective nation (See also Shay, 1999).

Landzelius (2003) also suggests that the representation of traditional culture can be problematic because it assumes that everyone has access to these roots, as though words such as “heritage” and “folk” directly refer to an actual entity that existed in the past, compartmentalized and ready to be claimed, rather than being socially and culturally constructed in identity struggles of the present. For example, in the Uzbek context there was no heritage that resembled Danko’s portrayal of the Uzbek folk dancers. After conquering Central Asia with relative ease during the Civil War, in 1924 the Soviet authorities delimited the region into five major component republics – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kirghizia, all with nominally distinct ethnic populations, languages, capitals, flags, governing bodies, and constitutions, but with overlapping traditions, customs, and clans.⁷² I would suggest that the essentialist

⁷⁰ Moreover, the representation of (some of) the official ethnicities as a unified nation could be read as an attempt to mask the true state of ethnic tensions in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Unsurprisingly, in her investigation into public opinion in the Soviet Union during this era, Davies (1997) finds that Russian animosity toward other ethnic groups was not directed toward the national republics, but against the minorities actually living on Russian territory, such as Jews, Georgians, and Finns.

⁷¹ In this context, by “essentialist” I mean the process of simplifying the traits of a given group to certain, recognizable elements.

⁷² Scholars still contest Moscow’s reasoning in the partitioning of Central Asia. For example, Hirsh (2000) argues that the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia was a manifestation of the Soviet regime’s

portrayal of the Uzbek dancer fractures when examined in the light of early Soviet nation-building policies. Uzbekistan itself was a constructed polity, a quintessential “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase, in which many national traditions underwent a process of invention during Soviet consolidation in the mid-1920s (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983).⁷³ Women played a key role in imagining the new Uzbek republic.

Part of the creation of an Uzbek “imagined community” consisted of creating a new role for Uzbek women within their society. Soviet activists stationed in Central Asia during the 1920s were appalled by widespread gender disparity in the region (Massell, 1974). Because traditional Islamic and Central Asian tradition dictated that unrestricted female mobility and unveiling would lead to widespread social disorganization, demoralization, promiscuity, and harlotry, women were secluded both bodily and spatially. According to Massell (1974), women were segregated in the female quarter of the home, unable to leave the house without male permission, restricted from participating in public life, and obliged to conceal their bodies under a veil in the presence of men. The veil worn by Central Asian women consisted of the *chavchon*, a mash of woven horsehair that covered a woman’s face and neck, and the *parandai*, a heavy cotton garment with false sleeves that hung from the top of the head, which held the *chavchon* in place and covered the rest of the body (Northrop, 2000). In her travel narrative written in 1925, the British travel writer Ella R. Christie alludes to the two-fold spatial and bodily seclusion of women:

attempt to define a new model of colonization, which emphasized the long-term social goal of modernization. See also Slezkine (1994).

⁷³ On the ethnic formation of Uzbek ethnicity in history, see Ilkhamov (2004).

And how can one describe that picturesque crowd, and where could one find such an absolute kaleidoscope of colouring? [...] Such gay butterflies are the men, for women are seldom or never seen out of doors, and if ever they are met, one finds them from the head downwards smothered in a dark coloured or grey alpaca coat-like garment with elongated sleeves, the cuffs of which are fastened at the edge of the back of the coat, and their fringed ends trail in the dust (1925: 150).

On occasions of public celebration that involved the community at large, women fulfilled the role of spectator, remaining on the sidelines and segregated from men. Muslim religion and Central Asian tradition did not contain festivals devoted to women, nor did they provide females with any equal, meaningful opportunities for participation and celebration. Moreover, in a world where dramatic entertainment was intimately related to religious or religio-customary rituals, virtuous women could not perform in public, even in roles calling for female actors (Doi, 2001; Massell, 1974; Adams, 2005). As such, female performance was restricted to the segregated courtyards of a woman's home.

Due to the Soviet perception of glaring gender disparity in Central Asia, the Party launched a campaign to liberate women from traditional norms of bodily and spatial seclusion. But the campaign was not intended solely as an instrument to advance the status of women; central to the construction of an Uzbek state was the socialist goal of creating a class-conscious citizen. However, the rural nature of the newly founded republic, the absence of a strong working-class and the near-total absence of self-proclaimed socialists among the local population posed problems for the construction of socialism in Central Asia. As such, in 1926 Soviet authorities decided to substitute gender for class, and Central Asian women became what Gregory Massell (1974) has termed the "surrogate proletariat."

Due to their inferior social status, Uzbek women were perceived to be natural allies in the construction of a more equitable society under socialism, and their emancipation from traditional gender roles became intertwined with the Soviet goal of building socialism in Central Asia. In order to emancipate women and, by extension, begin the construction of socialism in Uzbekistan, Soviet authorities laid siege to the most apparent symbol of female inequality – the veil (Kamp, 2008; Northrop, 2000; Massell, 1974).⁷⁴ Beginning in 1926 and lasting for the remainder of the 1920s, *Zhenotdel* delegates in Uzbekistan launched a *hujum* – de-veiling campaign – that encouraged women to shed their veils and attend women’s conferences throughout the region.⁷⁵ Northrop (2000) notes that during this timeframe the veil effectively became the meta-symbol of Uzbek identity, a marker of who belonged to the new republic and who did not. In the official Party view:

Communism is as incompatible with the *chadra* of native women as a dark night [is with] the full, bright sunshine of the day. The *chadra* is the shameful mark of [long], hoary centuries of despotism and slavery, darkness, and ignorance; and besides this, [it is] an obstacle on the path towards the revolutionary advancement of the global working class. From this perspective every *chadra* that is torn away from a [woman’s] face signals the victory of new life over the musty past, the victory of culture and light – [that is, the victory of] communism (Central Asian communist, as quoted in Northrop, 2000).

Although public shame and prosecution served as sanctions against men who refused to unveil their wives (Northrop, 2000: 193), male Uzbek resistance to the de-veiling campaign was widespread due to the belief that female unveiling would lead to

⁷⁴ On the legal framework of women’s liberation in Central Asia, see Massell (1974).

⁷⁵ The *Zhenotdel* (Women’s Bureau) was formed in 1919 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in order to coordinate the Party’s work among women. The task of the *Zhenotdel* was to mobilize women to support Party policy and inform them of their newfound rights under socialism. Massell (1974) notes that Uzbekistan was where the assault against women’s veiling was concentrated. Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, served as the headquarters for all Soviet apparatuses – political, economic, and military – of overall regional administration in Central Asia, and was, by the same token, the most important single link between Moscow and the Muslim hinterland. For a more recent overview of the Central Asian Bureau see Keller (2003).

social disorganization, demoralization and promiscuity (Massell, 1974, p. 276). As one village communist party member declared,

Let them kick me out of the Party, but I will not unveil my wife, and I will not take her to the demonstration. I have lots of money now, and I give a percentage of it [as alms] to the peasants. Besides this I have a large garden, a house, and forty head of cattle, so I have no need for the party and can make do without it. Let them kick me out of the party, but I will not unveil my wife.” (Burhan Babaev, village Communist since 1918, during the *hujum*, 1927, quoted p.179)

Despite this resistance, *Zhenotdel* activists did achieve some success with the de-veiling campaign. Some women became enthusiastic supporters of the Soviet campaign, and even activists themselves. More responded pragmatically by de-veiling when they were away from their own neighbourhoods, and re-veiled when close to home (Massell, 1974). Others, usually those who were oldest and most resistant to change, refused to go out in public if it meant they had to be unveiled.

From the perspective of official discourse, I would suggest that Danko’s image of the unveiled female Uzbek dancer is meant to connote female liberation. In Sverdlov Square station, although the head of the female Uzbek dancer is covered by a long robe, her hair is not obscured but can be glimpsed at her temples, and her face is uncovered and demurely smiling. In choosing to display the Uzbek dancer without her traditional veil, Danko was making a political statement affirming the liberation and equality of Uzbek women. However, I would argue that the image of the Uzbek dancer connoted numerous additional meanings in addition to liberation from traditional norms.

If we conceptualize the unveiled dancer’s image as an indexical sign, we can gain some insight into how the de-veiling campaign might have intruded upon a state-sanctioned reading of the Uzbek dancer, just as memories of collectivization could have complicated an officially sanctioned reading of joyful rural life. Because an indexical sign generates association by contiguity, rather than resemblance or convention – as is the

case with a symbol – an indexical sign can be associated with prior events and memories. From a semiotic perspective, such memories are inherently multivocal. Gross (2000) argues that alternate ways of remembering are always available to anyone at any time, but that it can be challenging to search out and hold on to countermemories at a time when most others are content with memories that are already in circulation. However, Birth (2006) reminds us that the past should not be limited by the assumption that it only serves present needs, as such a view “deprives the past of its potentially uncanny, disruptive, and contested presence.”

The decision to unveil could meet with terrifying consequences. Central Asian men, furious at external Soviet attempts to disrupt the status quo, lashed out violently against their “liberated” female friends and family members, *Zhenotdel* workers, and supportive male communists. By the time the *hujum* was relaxed in 1928, at least 800 people had died in the violent backlash (Massell, 1974). However, in that same year the symbol of female liberation took on a new dimension; Uzbek singer Muhayiddin Kari Yakubov started the first national dance troupe and included young women in the repertory. Such a move was in defiance of traditional Central Asian norms of female spatial and bodily seclusion. As Reed (1998: 517) notes, “prohibitions on and regulation of dance practices are often accurate indices of prevailing sexual moralities linked to the regulation of women’s bodies.” This was certainly the case in Soviet Uzbekistan, where unveiled women unequivocally signified shame (for her family) and shamelessness (for herself). Hence, the Uzbek dance troupe effectively continued the program begun with the de-veiling campaign instituted two years earlier – to transform Uzbek society by transforming the lives of Uzbek women. Dance, along with unveiling, played an

important role in the overall project of building socialism in Uzbekistan and Central Asia as a whole.

Although the female Uzbek dancer portrayed by Danko in Sverdlov Square Station is an ideal type and a signifier of female liberation, she was incarnated in several real persons with whom the Soviet public would have been familiar. As an iconic sign, she could symbolize two well-known female Uzbek dancers of the time: Tamara Khonim and Noor Khon. Tamara Khonim achieved fame as the first woman in Uzbekistan to dance without the veil. Born in 1906 and raised in rural Uzbekistan, she developed a passion for dance in her early childhood. Despite her family's objections, she decided to become a dancer after the Uzbek singer Yakubov and a group of touring musicians came to her town and invited her to dance with them (Doi, 2002). Her decision to become a dancer was not without controversy: in one of her performances an audience member fired a gun at the stage as an attempt on her life (Doi, 2002). However, Khonim continued in her career path and eventually became famed at home and abroad for her dancing. She frequently toured internationally and was a gold medal winner at the London International Festival of National [Folk] Dance in 1935, the winner of a Stalin Prize⁷⁶ in 1939 and, after WW II, she went on to be elected to the Supreme Soviet of her native Uzbekistan (Doi, 2002).

Although Khonim enjoyed a successful career as a dancer, the same cannot be said of one of her counterparts, Noor Khon. In 1928, at the height of male backlash toward the de-veiling campaign and the year that Yakubov's dance troupe was established, Khon's brother stabbed her to death for dishonouring her family by

⁷⁶ Beginning in 1939, lucrative Stalin Prizes were awarded annually to distinguished individuals in the fields of art and science. Tamara Khanum was one of seven dancers to receive one in its inaugural year.

performing unveiled in public. Anthropologist Mary Doi, in her interviews with contemporary Uzbek dancers in the 1990s, notes that Noor Khon's story remained universally known to the dance community, a fact that attests to the enduring nature of gender and dance in the formation of Uzbek identity.

By the time Sverdlov square station opened in 1938, unveiling had become more common, though it was still not a universal practice in Central Asia and would not disappear completely until at least the 1940s (Northrop, 2000). In 1934, several years after the end of the de-veiling campaign, the French travel writer Ella K. Maillart was still surprised by the prevalence of veils in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan.

It all astonishes me: the narrow, stone-paved streets, labyrinthine, the numbers of veiled women, in the stiff, unbroken lines of their 'paranjas,' looking like silhouetted upright coffins with some basket or package balanced on every head [...] so dark and rigid is the horsehair which scarifies the tips of their noses [...] their sight is only able to filter through when the 'chedra' is hanging straight down in front of them (1934: 150).

Thus, the figure of the dancing Uzbek woman in Sverdlov station, while replete with socialist realist tropes, is nonetheless ripe with ambiguity. Her appearance in Sverdlov Square station only ten years after the de-veiling campaign meant that memories, still fresh in the minds of those who had experienced the campaign, would mediate any reading of the image. Conceived as an indexical sign, her image would have the potential to trigger memories that were both contrary to and disruptive of official discourse of women's liberation in Central Asia as well as gender equality. For those who had lost a friend, sister, or mother to the violence of the de-veiling campaign, she might signify a martyr, to others – a symbol of shame. On one hand, her penetration into the secular public sphere thwarted traditional Uzbek customs and norms, and could be read as a new form of emancipation for Central Asian women (See also Sargin, 2004). On the other,

she could be read simply as part of the project to assimilate the Muslim republics to a Soviet modernization process that was predicated on European values and norms.

Furthermore, the use of dancers to symbolize the newly formed Uzbek nation also projected various interpretations. In contrast to pre-Soviet Russia, which had long boasted an array of privileged dancers and ballerinas, dance in pre-Soviet Central Asia was neither well-regarded nor widely practiced. Shay (2002:65) posits that the use of dance as a representation of “the people” of the Muslim republics, including Uzbekistan, can be considered “a colonial act imposed by the Russians over the groups they dominated.” However, I would argue that this interpretation is only partially correct, and obscures the fact that Soviet nationalities policies – rather than destroying traditional culture – actually preserved it even as they transformed it (see also Adams, 2005). Although public dancing by both sexes had been anomalous in pre-Soviet Central Asia, the fact remains that dance was not a completely alien form of cultural expression. Unique dance traditions existed in the Uzbek regions of Ferghana, Bukhara, and Khorezm that drew on different lexicons of movement, even if they only existed as a form of cultural expression by women within the privacy of their own homes (Doi, 2002; Swift, 1968). Moreover, it was a native Uzbek, not a Russian, who started the first Uzbek dance troupe in 1928. As such, dancers – particularly women – were implicated in a hybridized cultural process that both enmeshed them in the Soviet project of building socialism in Uzbekistan as well as freed them from previous cultural restrictions.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how meaning(s) related to the interwoven themes of gender, ethnicity, and “the friendship of the peoples” complicate an officially-sanctioned

reading of the artwork in Sverdlov Square station. First, the representation of the nationalities is, on one hand, a visual affirmation of national culture. However, on the other hand, it is an essentialist portrayal that serves to exclude the vast majority of ethnic minorities that helped make up the population of the Soviet Union. In regard to the female Uzbek dancer, Danko's art made a clear political statement in favour of the renunciation of patriarchy and the affirmation of female liberation. However, in practice, the de-veiling campaign was staunchly opposed by many Uzbeks and had deadly consequences for the female population until the campaign was finally brought to an ignominious halt in 1928. Thus, the reality of de-veiling problematizes an officially sanctioned reading of equality and female liberation in Danko's artwork.

CHAPTER SEVEN - Conclusion

Echoing Miles (1997), public art can never be truly neutral, as it functions to define and make apparent the values of the public realm. As works of public art, the sculptures contained within Sverdlov Square station were rather unconventional: they did not commemorate a significant persona or a terminal act – such as the end of a war – but were erected to celebrate the continuing ideal of the glorious socialist future. Indeed, the content of Natalia Danko's artwork in Sverdlov Square station was intended to promulgate values that were formed only recently, such as ethnic and gender equality and the joy of everyday life. Moreover, the form of this art – socialist realism – had only recently been sanctioned. As such, the art and architecture of the metro could be read multiple ways.

As I noted earlier in this thesis, there are three stages at which meaning is attributed to a work of art: during its production, at the point of its reception, and at the site of the image itself. This thesis has been predominantly concerned with the image and its reception. I have used semiotic theory to analyze the images in Sverdlov Square metro station because semiotic theory is centrally concerned with reception; it does not set out to produce interpretations of works of art, but rather to investigate the processes by which viewers make sense of the art that they see. Semiotics is unique in that it provides a conceptual framework for analyzing an entire range of cultural phenomena including art, dance, parades, costume, speech, etc. As a method of inquiry for this thesis, semiotics was useful in allowing me to make connections between these disparate forms of cultural phenomena and weave together a sense of meaning for the artwork in Sverdlov Square station.

My aim in analyzing the art and architecture of Sverdlov Square station was two-fold: to explore themes relating to the artwork therein and to tease out some of the many contradictions between the real and the represented in the Stalinist 1930s. Throughout this thesis I have largely avoided using the term “resistance” to describe viewer’s responses to the art within Sverdlov Square station, because in order for resistance to exist there must first be a well-established hegemonic discourse to oppose. During the 1930s many Muscovites were new to the city – having recently arrived from rural areas – and therefore likely had a limited knowledge of official Soviet discourse. Moreover, Soviet discourse throughout the 1930s was frequently changing and thus difficult to grasp. As a result, I have argued that the architecture and art in Sverdlov Square station both conformed to and conflicted with the official discourse of the Soviet state. Consequently, a metro passenger viewing the art within Sverdlov Square station may have resisted its officially sanctioned message, but may also have assimilated, misinterpreted or simply not acknowledged it.

My argument therefore has been that meaning is multiple, and that the art and architecture in Sverdlov Square station had the potential to both reinforce and disrupt the officially sanctioned meaning of the artwork enshrined therein. The underlying argument is that the production of meaning is not a straightforward process, and that art and architecture situated in public space are very much involved in this production. I thus contend that the Moscow metro, one of the superlative Soviet projects of the 1930s – constructed to embody the ideals of the Soviet state – can perhaps best be understood as an ambiguous space where meaning was open to diverse interpretations.

Much of the analysis of this thesis has been speculative, which is a product both of the semiotic method and a lack of primary source material. The work I have referenced in this thesis only scratches the surface of material that could be useful in a more in-depth future endeavour, which should include Russian source materials such as archival data and newspapers. Further analysis of such material would help to more clearly articulate possible interpretations of these public works of art. Regardless, the reception of public art – particularly in regard to its potentially disruptive effects – remains a relatively unexplored avenue of academic inquiry and one that could prove fruitful for future research.

Despite the shortcomings of this thesis and the inherent difficulty in gauging public reaction to the public art of the past, it should be noted that the practice and politics of public art continue to be salient issues in the context of post-Soviet Moscow (Forest and Johnson, 2002; Gambrell, 1997). Issues regarding the interpretation of past heroes – including not only Lenin and Stalin but also Peter the Great – continue to surface in the capital city, attesting to the enduring capacity of public art not only to represent official values, but to question and disrupt them as well.

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APPENDIX A

Of the Miracle Staircase

A.V. Morozova

I've lived a bit in this world,
And been a few places,
And seen a few things.
Right now I'm on top of the earth,
But I was under the earth, too –
Thirty metres down.
How did I get there?
I'll tell you from the beginning.
I rose early in the morning,
Set out for the train station.
Boarded the passenger train,
And found myself in Moscow,
Right next to the Subway.
I looked for the miracle-staircase,
And when I caught sight of this staircase,
I got frightened and started to flee.
I wanted to run, but people grabbed me:
"No, no, my little old lady, you've come to visit us,
So stay and see!"
I only had to step on the staircase,
And it took me own underground in one minute.
Here I grabbed my head.
I said to myself: "Oh, oh,
What do I see in front of me?"
A train station exactly like a palace,
Just like a palace of white stone,
Columns and walls all of marble,
Lampshades like sculptures,
Of frosted glass.
The light is very bright,
And the air is very clean.
I didn't even think I was underground,
Thirty meters deep.
Well, I went further,
Along came a train with many cars,
All full of people,
People who looked prosperous.
The doors opened by themselves,
The people exited and I entered,
I sat down on a soft seat.
In the train all fixtures were made of nickel.

And I sat and I thought:
The great and greatest,
Our wise Stalin,
And his disciple
Lazar Moiseevich Kaganovich,
Have created many miracles for us,
Under the earth, thirty meters deep.
They've built such stations,
And they've introduced streetcars,
And put airplanes in the air –
When their engines start up,
They want to set out into space.
They've dug out deep canals into the oceans,
And in the fields they've put out a little pig,
With steel bristles.
It plows the pasture with its tail,
And with its snout it binds the grain.
Twelve girls walk behind it,
And pick up the sheaves,
And bake us doughnuts –
All we have to do is eat.
Oh, our great Stalin,
We had nothing to eat and nothing to drink,
We wanted to gaze upon you.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Originally published in *Pravda* on 25 December 1935, Morozova's piece is reprinted in Miller (1990).